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THE
FLORENTINE
CHAIR



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THE FLORENTINE CHAIR

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE ABSURD REPENTANCE

THE VINTAGE OF DREAMS

POEMS

THE
FLORENTINE CHAIR

A COMIC IDYLL

BY
ST. JOHN LUCAS

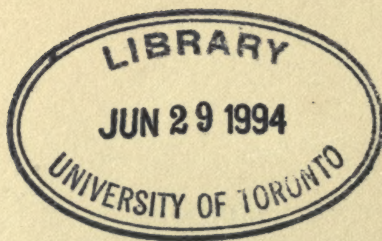
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TO
DESMOND F. T. COKE
IN AFFECTION

I

“AH!” said the sexton, with a grim chuckle, “they all go along the church-yard path one time or another, every man and maid of ’em, every wife and widder. Ain’t many as get through the world without baptism or burial. Ain’t many, even, as get through without marriage.”

“Which is the second death,” said Raymond, without removing his pipe from his profane lips. “Shakespeare said something the same, with a slightly stronger literary flavour. Every man of your profession should know *Hamlet* by heart.”

The sexton laid down his scythe, and mopped his brow with an azure hand-

kerchief. He was mowing the small meadow that intervened between Raymond's cottage and the churchyard. The sun was at the apex of the cloudless, clear blue dome of the sky, and the sexton's face, like a round red moon, reflected its glory.

Raymond lay in the shade and watched him. Raymond was a hedonist.

"I don't know no tongues," said the sexton: "in my young days there weren't all these new-fangled tricks o' teachin',—piano-playin' and the like. I was brought up to my trade, and to my trade I've stuck."

"Adam's profession—the oldest in the world," murmured Raymond.

"I believe yer," said the sexton solemnly.

"Except Eve's," Raymond added.

"Eh?" queried the sexton.

"Being tempted, and tempting," Raymond explained.

The sexton began to mow again. Far above him a lark sang its wonderful lyric. The bees boomed among the roses, and in the tall sweet-scented grass small creatures rustled mysteriously.

"It is possible," went on the philosopher beneath the hedge, "that you have never thought very much about the female sex. Only a married man can take women seriously. Have you ever been married, O man of bones?"

"Not I!" replied the sexton with a snort. "Women's a luxury. Not for me, I reckon."

"Your point of view is usually original," said Raymond. "It is obvious that you neither read nor write modern literature. But I think you are wrong, though the error is a kindly one. To pronounce woman a luxury is to excuse—nay, to praise her. The history of humanity proves, however, with distressing logic, that she is as

necessary as air, or food, or death—your speciality.”

“A wife’s a luxury,” chuckled the heedless sexton, as he laid down his scythe by the hedge.

“So is bad champagne—to some people,” said Raymond severely.

“Dinner-time,” said the sexton, and began to move away. He was obviously content with his own philosophy.

Raymond contemplated his retreating figure pensively. “And yet,” he said at last—“and yet he has seen, perhaps he has even supported, many a tearful bridegroom through the first sad scene of his life. I was wrong: he is no thinker—he is but a stylist hag-ridden by the perfection of his phrase. I believe he is muttering it still.” He raised his voice to a pitch audible to the now-distant sexton. “She isn’t!” he cried.

The sexton halted, looked back, and wagged his absurd old head. “A

luxury, that's what she is!" he shouted.

Raymond lay down, convulsed with laughter. A moment later he was startled into a guiltily erect posture. Some one had come through the gate close to him.

"I hope I am not trespassing?" said a voice.

"You are," said Raymond, peering round the hawthorn sprays; "unless you're my landlord or his wife, there's not the least atom of doubt that you are."

A dress of soft, clinging white stuff swished through the grass, and the trespasser came and stood in front of him. At the first sight of her he regretted his hasty speech. She was not in the least like his landlord or his landlord's wife. He rose swiftly to his feet, and was dazed for a moment by the sudden change of attitude.

"I beg your pardon," he said, bowing. His hat was somewhere in the enchanted depths of the June undergrowth. Then the slight dizziness passed away, and he looked at her face.

His own must have surprised her. His lips parted to an oval of utter wonder, he stared at her as one risen from the dead, and seemed about to utter an amazed cry. He checked it suddenly.

She smiled. "I must apologise," she said: "I had no idea . . . we only came here a few days ago."

He was still staring at her, but some part of his wits returned, and, subconsciously, he realised that she must be one of the visitors at the Rectory, a bower of roses not far from his own.

"Please cross the field whenever you like," he murmured. "It will be shorter for you, if you want to go to the village."

She raised her eyebrows very slightly,

as if surprised at his evident knowledge of her abode.

“Thank you very much,” she answered, “but I’m afraid that we shall ruin your grass.”

“Oh, please do!” he cried. “One of the articles of agreement when I took the place was that I might ruin as much grass as ever I could. I shall be really grateful if you will help me; I had almost given up hope of trampling down more than a few square yards, and, this morning, when the son of Adam brought a scythe, I resolved to give a school-treat, or do something equally desperate. I can’t bear to see the man leaving the ground as bare as a chess-board.”

He talked swift nonsense, hardly conscious of what he said, for the wild wonder of his heart overwhelmed every sense, and the solid earth failed beneath his feet.

She listened with a slight smile. “The

son of Adam is the sexton?" she asked.

"Sexton by trade, philosopher by nature," he answered. "He is a superb optimist too—a quality which one would not naturally associate with his calling. But all the world should be optimistic in June."

"It is very beautiful," she said.

"Optimism, or June?" he asked, still watching her with an intentness which was perhaps more flattering than polite.

She did not answer, but, with a smile and a slight inclination of the head, began to move away. She turned, however, when she had gone a few steps.

"Good morning," she said, and then she disappeared through the gate. He could hear the rustling of her skirts in the grass. She was walking very slowly.

"After all," said Raymond aloud to the landscape, "there is such a thing as nature mimicking art. Mimicking it?"

No! ten thousand times no!—idealising it, personifying its inmost essence, turning its faint charm to living, breathing, glorious womanhood. But what a marvel, what a billion-to-one chance to happen! I'll go build an altar to the god of coincidence."

He did not do this, however, but sat with his hands clasping his knees, gazing into the sky.

After a while the sexton returned, and having leisurely removed as many garments as propriety allowed, began to mow once more.

"Before you retired to satisfy a merely carnal appetite," said Raymond, "we were talking of women, and of women in the abstract. Let us speak of them now in the concrete—perhaps, indeed, the only form in which they should be mentioned. An abstract woman, my dear sir, is as absurd as a theoretical peacock, or the Platonic idea of a goose."

“Eh ?” said the sexton.

“Since you wish me, apparently, to state my question more briefly,” said Raymond, “who is the lady who walks like a goddess, smiles like a queen, has eyes changeful as the sea in April, and a voice like that divinest harmony which all great musicians miss, and know they miss ?”

The sexton thought for some moments, and then said he didn’t know.

“But you must know,” cried Raymond, “you must know within two minutes, or be food for the sepulchre. Though a goddess, she does not disdain to stay at a Rectory ; though a queen, her imperious foot is content to tread the carpet of a cleric. Come now, who is she ?”

“Staying at the Rect’ry,” said the sexton slowly : “d’ye mean Mrs. Egerton ?”

Raymond became thoughtful. “There

is much virtue in that Mrs., to parody Touchstone," he said.

"Oh! she's all right," said the sexton.

"On the whole, I am inclined to hope that I don't mean Mrs. Egerton," said Raymond, "unless Mr. Egerton has been a subject for your sombre art. Does she answer exactly to the description that I gave you?"

"She wears spectacles," said the old man, rubbing his stubbly chin, and regarding Raymond with an air of pity.

"Thank Heaven for that!" cried Raymond. "Goddesses and queens don't wear spectacles,—queens of romance don't, at any rate. 'No glass obscures my maiden's eyes from me,' as the poet absurdly said."

"P'raps you mean the Reverend's sister," said the sexton—"her as came to the Rect'ry with Mrs. Egerton a day or so ago. I mind her when she was so high, and climbed the churchyard elm."

“I do! I’m confident that I do!” cried Raymond. “Dalrymple’s sister! What a wild, mad chance! This is such stuff as dreams are made of, like the pudding you have just eaten, man of bones. Life, life!” he continued, apostrophising the amazed sexton, with a dramatic gesture—“Life is a foolish play, in which, hitherto, all the mummers have made their entrances at the wrong moment and taken the wrong cues. But now one of the players has stepped on to the stage as if she really had some sense of dramatic propriety. She’s a genius! It’s too wonderful! Farewell, old Adam, farewell.” And he walked quickly away in the direction of his cottage.

The sexton straightened his back to watch him depart. His eyes glowed with a great pity.

II

“ I HAVE been on an exciting voyage of discovery,” said Sibyl Dalrymple, as she came towards an elderly lady who sat beneath the tulip tree in the Rectory garden : “ do you feel like the prophetess Deborah ? You resemble her precisely. There is a young man at the cottage.”

“ What is he like ? ” asked Mrs. Egerton.

“ He was rather like the hayfield where he sat when I saw him first,” replied Sibyl, sinking into a chair ; “ but he appears to possess a tongue and a mind. He was discussing us with the sexton. That argues a sense of humour.”

“ Discussing us ! ” cried Mrs. Egerton.
“ What extraordinary impertinence ! ”

"Our sex, I mean," explained her niece.

"That is worse," said Mrs. Egerton sagely. "Men who talk about us individually are comparatively harmless, but men who generalise about us are sure to be women-haters, or philosophers, or something dreadful. . . . I don't like women-haters and philosophers. They are such shameless trespassers on one's own preserves. What was the conclusion of the argument?"

"An abrupt one," said Sibyl: "the sexton went to his dinner. But I only appeared in time to hear the last epigram. Then I talked to the young man."

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Egerton. "On the same subject?"

"No," answered Sibyl gravely. "We talked about agriculture. The young man has theories on grass."

"Grass! I shall detest him," said

Mrs. Egerton. "I suppose that Theodore will call on him?"

"Theodore shall," said Miss Dalrymple firmly. "I believe the young man is trying to be a hermit, and that ought not to be allowed. It is Theodore's duty as his temporary pastor to go and stir him up. He may be writing a novel, or inventing an anarchic machine. Theodore will stop all that, though: he is the greatest nuisance in the world when once his friendly feelings are aroused."

"The young man will demonstrate the efficiency of his machine to him, or read his novel: then you will be sorry for having uttered such a sisterly judgment," said her aunt.

"Oh! Theodore is safe enough," said Miss Dalrymple scornfully; "Theodore isn't meant to be a martyr: he is much too unpicturesque. Since he came here he has grown positively fat."

"I can't help it, my dear," said the

Reverend Theodore, coming round the tulip tree. "I suppose my martyrdom, in which you display such a flattering interest, is this distressing physical enlargement. But apropos of what subject did you mention me? I don't pretend to imagine that I had the felicity of forming the central topic of your conversation." He lit a large pipe and settled himself comfortably in a long chair.

"Apropos of the young man," answered Sibyl, without evincing the least surprise at his sudden appearance: "you will have to call on him, so you had better meditate on the manner it will be best for you to adopt. Let me see: there is the portly, benignant manner——"

"The bright-eyed, eager manner," said Mrs. Egerton.

"The suave, subscription manner," went on Sibyl.

"Style of the melancholy ascetic——"

“Style of robust athlete, or school-treat manner——”

“And style of the man who is tremendously bullied by his female relatives, and therefore rejoices like a giant when he enters a lone bachelor’s abode,” said the Reverend Theodore blandly. “Don’t you think that about concludes the list? As I detest affectation, I shall adopt the last-mentioned manner. That is, I should do so if I had any intention of visiting the young man, as you absurdly call him. Why, the fellow is older than I am!”

“You won’t call on him?” said Sibyl. “Then I shall write to the Bishop.”

“Not call on him?” “Why on earth?” cried Mrs. Egerton.

“My excellent people,” said Theodore, in the finest *ex cathedra* manner—“for the best reason in the world. I called on the young man two days ago.”

“And you never told us!” they cried. “What was he like?” added Sibyl.

“A hayfield?” suggested Mrs. Egerton.

“Hayfield! Why hayfield?” asked Theodore, looking at her in a mystified fashion. Then, as she did not explain, he went on: “He has come down here to write a book: Greek pots, or something like that, you know.”

“I said so,” cried Sibyl triumphantly. “Go on!”

“That’s all,” said Theodore, “except that he’s rather a good sort. Travelled a lot. Pretty slack, though: my sexton, who mows his field, says that he does nothing but lie under the hedge all day. These literary chaps lead beastly irregular lives. I didn’t see him at church.”

“I did,” said Mrs. Egerton; “and he smiled when you said *ac-know-ledge*. I think I shall like him.”

“I hope he won’t set a bad example to the parish,” said Theodore.

“I shall like him,” said Sibyl suddenly:

“he has romantic eyes and a humorous mouth.”

“Then his features are at war with one another,” said her aunt. “I wonder which wins?”

“Why, when did you see him, Sibyl?” asked Theodore.

“Oh, I had a long talk with him in his field,” said Sibyl. “He told me that I was trespassing. We had a delightful conversation.”

“More bad examples for the parish,” groaned the Rector, knocking out his pipe on the toe of his boot. “Hullo! here’s the Boy!”

For a sturdy person of thirteen or fourteen was coming across the lawn. He was clad in white flannels and an ancient Norfolk jacket, and on his head was an outworn white hat. His eyes were large and dark, like Sibyl’s, but his hair was very different from her shining black tresses, being yellow, and so

absurdly fluffy that no brush could tame it. He strolled towards his admiring family with his hands in his pockets and an expression of deep innocence on his sunburnt face.

“You young scoundrel!” said Theodore, shaking his fist at him: “where on earth have you been? You ought to have learnt the Middle and Passive of *λυώ* this morning. What do you mean by going out directly after breakfast?”

“I thought it would do me good to have a bathe in the river,” said the Boy. “There was no soap in the bathroom this morning,” he added after a moment, with a grin.

“No soap!” echoed Theodore, in accents of the most profound scorn, and looking at his sister and his aunt to see if they were duped by this specious defence.

They avoided his indignant eye. The Boy lay down on the grass.

“I say,” he said after a while, “I’ve

just met such a funny sort of chap! I was going across that field next to the church when I saw a fellow coming to meet me. I guessed it was the new man at the cottage, and felt rather blue, 'cause it was his meadow grass I was walking on."

"I hope he chastised you, Cecil," said Mrs. Egerton severely.

"No fear!" answered the Boy. "He came up and looked at me for a long time without saying anything, and then he asked me if I could roll. I thought he meant roll with a roller, and I said that I could in winter—for it's awfully hot work, you know. But he looked very solemn, and said that he meant could I use myself like a roller so as to save him the trouble of mowing his grass. I was just going to show him how to do it when old Jarman came along, and the man told me not to roll after all, as old Jarman didn't approve of

scientific agriculture. And then we went into his garden and ate strawberries; and whilst we were there a housekeeper sort of person came out and said there wasn't any mustard in the house, and should she get some? And the man looked most awfully angry, and pointed to the strawberry bed and asked her what was the good of his growing strawberries if he hadn't any mustard to eat with them? And she was quite frightened. I'm certain he's mad, for when I asked him if he played cricket, he said there was a set of hoops in the summer-house, but that he'd lost all his cues by shooting them at the moon. You ought to go and look after him, The."

"I propose to devote all my leisure to looking after you," said his brother sternly. "And I won't have you trespassing over this gentleman's field."

"Oh, but he has invited me!" cried the Boy. "He told me to come when-

ever I liked, and to bring my skates with me. He is a funny chap ! ”

“ A most mysterious young man,” said Mrs. Egerton. “ Perhaps it would be as well to ask him to dinner.”

III

MEANWHILE, the young man who was the subject of the foregoing discussion sat at a book-strewn table and contemplated the pattern of his wall-paper, murmuring softly to himself.

“*It is a coincidence!*” he said—“one of those marvellous chances which happen once a century, that men may realise all their silly theories and logics aren’t worth a whiff of garlic. But to think that it should happen to me! To think that my carefully constructed scheme of being content with the love of an ideal face should be knocked into a thousand flinders by a mere resemblance! It is only a resemblance, of course: her face is ten thou-

sand times more beautiful than any statue's; yet it's somehow the same. Dunton must have seen her somewhere, and had a hazy memory of her loveliness as he chipped away at his marble. I wonder where he is, by the way; I'll write and ask him if he has any recollection of being inspired by an exquisite unknown. He can't have had a model. . . . A model! By Jove! Oh, of course that's impossible. I forgot. What a brute I am!"

Having delivered himself of these cryptic remarks, he took up a pen and wrote as follows:

" . . . I don't know where you are, so I send this to your London address. When I went to your studio things were all right; the dust lay thick on sheeted masterpieces, and the very cigarette ends on your floor were undisturbed. The key is safely in my possession.

“My critical sense bade me undrape the finished marvels of your chisel. Sir, you are a genius; I take off my hat to you. Praxiteles himself will one day have to reckon with that female figure in the right-hand corner. She is marvellous; the perfection of Greece is hers, and I don't believe you made her. You dug her up, sir, and by some devilish piece of necromancy made her appear modern. Write by return—by return, and tell me all about her. I have loved her ever since the first moment when I saw her; she has haunted me day and night; the beautiful faces of life were ugly and sordid because of her loveliness. And now . . . ah, but I won't tell you my secret. I know, however, that no model ever had that face. Write—write and tell me the name of the god who made her manifest to you, and I'll turn pagan and pour him libations for the rest of my life.”

When he had scribbled this incoherent letter he went out into his field.

The sexton was mowing stolidly.

"Nearly done it, sir," he said, with a wave of his hand towards the swathes of grass.

"You will get no congratulations from me," said Raymond. "Have you ever been in love with a face you never saw?"

"Not I!" said the sexton; "nor with any other, neither."

"I can understand that," said Raymond: "the visionary artistic temperament is often unlured by life's realities. But I refuse to believe that you have never worshipped an ideal."

"Worshipped a what?" cried the sexton fiercely. He was an ardent church-goer.

"Well, let us say wanted," said Raymond. "Have you never desired something that you knew to be utterly unattainable? Have you never known

the subtle, terrible pleasure of an illimitable, inappeasable yearning? Then, my dear sir, I am sorry to inform you that, in spite of your own opinion of the matter, you have never lived. You are more rigid, more bloodless, than any statue. You aren't human. You might as well be a schoolmaster."

"D'ye mean wanting what you can't get?" asked the sexton slowly.

"That is my meaning," answered Raymond.

The sexton heaved a sigh. "Ah! I've felt like that," he said.

"Good!" cried Raymond joyfully. "Tell me your desire. Unfold to me the noble dream of your boyhood and your manly years. Don't be afraid; I shall sympathise."

The sexton lowered his voice to a note of sepulchral solemnity.

"Funeral like the late Squire," he said.

IV

Now Dunton the sculptor was abroad, and as usual had left no instructions concerning his correspondence. His brother, however, knew Raymond and Raymond's sprawling handwriting, and it was he who sent him the following explanatory note.

"I found your letter" (he wrote) "lying in Arthur's rooms when I went there the other day. I can't forward it, for I don't know if he is alive or dead, so it must even await his very problematic return. I don't expect him back till the end of the year, at any rate.

"He went off at a moment's notice. The truth not to wickedly stifle, he was more than half insane at the time. He

had become engaged, like a fool, to one of his models, a girl who sat to him for a big nude. Of course my people were furious about it, and of course their fury only strengthened Arthur's intention of marrying the girl. Personally, I disapproved of the affair, because, to speak plainly, I can't abide your artist who doesn't keep his passions remote from working hours.

"All went well for some time, and then all went very wrong indeed, from Arthur's point of view. The girl had the temper of a fiend ; she was furious when she discovered (accidentally, through me) that we did not intend to recognise her as one of the family. She and Arthur had a succession of noisy quarrels, and eventually she disappeared entirely, leaving him a nasty letter which contained an impertinent message to me ; and after raving for forty-eight hours he went also. This, of course, is strictly

private. If I get his address I'll send it to you.

"Yours ever,

"CHARLES DUNTON."

Raymond pondered over this letter for some time.

"So that's why he went off so suddenly, is it?" he said at length. "I thought there was something wrong; he seemed calm enough, though; I expect Charles exaggerates. Charles always was a bit of a prig. I should like to have seen the message that girl sent to him!"

He chuckled over his last thought; then resumed his meditation.

"Not any chance now of hearing whether Dunton ever saw Miss Dalrymple," he murmured. "But I'm fairly confident that he didn't: in fact, the more I think of it, the more absurd it seems to imagine that there was anything beyond the faintest, most shadowy

resemblance between his statue's cold, immobile beauty and her changing and wonderful charm. She grows more marvellous every hour. She is absolutely adorable. I would lie in a lake of burning marl if only one of her little feet might use me as a stepping-stone. I would let the son of Adam bury me quick if there was the faintest chance of her reproaching him afterwards on my account. And I'm a writer of cynical fiction, and something of a transcendental philosopher. Oh! I wonder—I wonder if she likes me ever so little! I wonder if she knows that I love and love and love her. Bah! Fool—fool and sentimental idiot! As if she would even dream that I was always thirstily watching for one of those swift, ineffable eye-flashes of hers! She dwells on the sunny mountain with the gods, and I crawl like a worm in the valley. She only talks to me because I'm an eccentric

literary person who is merely amusing because he is totally inhuman. Her brothers like me, though : I must cultivate her brothers. I will employ all the time-honoured and immoral subterfuges of the love-sick. But I mustn't let her see ; for oh ! if she suspects that the poor sinuous worm is trying to wriggle away from its valley, there'll be clouds round the mountain in the fraction of a moment ! ”

V

RAYMOND dined at the Rectory, and two days afterwards went to pay his call there.

The servant led the way into the garden, where he found Miss Dalrymple sitting in a basket chair with a novel in her lap. She rose when she saw him, and came forward.

“ You are not to be offended,” she said, “ because you aren’t received formally in a drawing-room. My aunt isn’t well ; I am regent in her stead, and I gave orders that all the county clans who called were to be sent out here for the due abasement of their pride. I hope you feel duly abased ? ”

“ I feel nothing but a delicious madness : I love you,” Raymond desired to

reply. "Surely I'm not a county clan?" was what he really said; "I don't even bring you the gossip of the neighbourhood. The sexton is my only friend, and his scandals are all over twenty years of age."

She leant back in her chair, her long slender hands lying idly on its arms. He looked at her as she sat there, his eyes drinking in the lovely lines of her figure, the whiteness of her neck, and the lights in the dark hair that was coiled so loosely, so cunningly, above it. Then he said inwardly, "No, there is nothing in the world like you; I was a fool: nothing can be so lovely—no statue, no star." Aloud he remarked that it was beautiful weather, and inquired earnestly after Mrs. Egerton, mentally swearing never to abuse relatives again.

"She has a headache, poor thing," said Sibyl: "the hot weather always brings them on. My brother has gone

to play cricket somewhere ; he talked of taking you with him. Do you play ? ”

“ No,” he answered ; “ the awful formality of the game fills me with nervous terror. It’s a degrading confession for an Englishman to make, isn’t it ? But I spent most of my long dead youth in Paris. I give you my word that when I went up to Oxford I didn’t know a crease from a cover-point.”

“ I’m so glad ! ” said Sibyl. “ Theodore is quite dreadful : he spends the summer in attempts to raise his average, and the winter in lamenting its insignificance. He has a wonderful theory, too, that cricket is part of his clerical work, and he is always threatening to preach a sermon in which the intimate relations of athletics and moral excellence will be clearly demonstrated.”

“ That would be certainly hard on athletics,” said Raymond with a smile, “ but no doubt it would please his

parishioners enormously. Isn't it curious that we English are never happy unless we can find some moral atmosphere hanging about our daily employments? Art was dragged into it long ago, and now even athletics are gravely considered from the ethical standpoint. We shall soon draw subtle distinctions, proving conclusively that Association football tends to utter virtue, but that the savage game under Rugby rules gives birth to a multitude of evils. Oh! for a race that is so seldom in training, our intellectual gymnastics are really wonderful!"

"I'm afraid you are not very patriotic," said Sibyl.

"Now, there you wrong me," answered Raymond. "I have lived in most of the civilised countries of the world, and in several that we are accustomed to call uncivilised, and not even amongst the latter did I find a place I loved like this. Besides, in this matter of moral

conclusions I'm as hardy an offender as any one. When I see a man in a loud check suit, and with his hat askew on his close-cropped head, don't I instantly feel with a thrill of pleasurable excitement that I am in the presence of one more wicked than myself? Don't you secretly admit the excessive goodness of any woman who wears her clothes exactly as if she were a peg in a wardrobe? Of course I do, and of course you do! We can't escape the universal characteristics of our race." "What *beastly* rot you are talking!" he added to himself savagely.

"Well, I hope you are wrong," she said. "I hope goodness isn't only present under the conditions you suggest."

"Oh! the clothes-peg condition denotes excessive goodness, as I said," replied Raymond, "and excessive goodness, properly speaking, isn't goodness at all. Real goodness is a mean between

two extremes, as I fancy some one pointed out in what we are accustomed to call the dark ages of heathenism."

"Has the sexton theories on goodness?" asked Sibyl.

"He has theories on everything in the world, I think," Raymond answered. "He is a mute inglorious Mill, a village Comte. Hamlet would have loved him. I adore him."

"I happened to overhear one of his theories the other day," she said.

"That wasn't fair," said Raymond sternly.

"I only heard two sentences," she pleaded, smiling.

"Which probably contained the conclusion of the whole matter," said Raymond. "The son of Adam is wonderfully skilful in summing up the argument in an epigram. No; it wasn't a bit fair. You ought to have run away with your fingers in your ears."

“The argument wasn’t very fair—to poor women,” said Sibyl.

“If only woman would be as fair to those who dispute about her as she seems!” began Raymond. “But that’s impossible, of course.” To himself he added, “Clumsy idiot! She’ll be offended; but I can’t help it, my head is beginning to spin round and round; I can only see her eyes. I must be calm, or I shall ruin everything.”

But she did not appear to be offended, nor, on the other hand, did she cast down her eyes and simper an entreaty that he would not be absurd. Apparently she had not noticed his wretched, laboured compliment.

“He hinted that women were superfluous,” she said.

“Well, I opposed him,” said Raymond. “I was on the side of the angels, at all events.”

“A faint-hearted partisan, an Egyptian

ally, I'm afraid," she answered. "But I wasn't accusing you."

"Thank you," said Raymond.

A silence followed. Raymond looked at the lady, the lady looked at the lawn. There was just a flicker of amusement beneath her indolent eyelids.

"I think you are the most lovely thing that God made," said Raymond inwardly.

His intellectual powers were by now reduced to an absurdity. Presently, however, it dawned upon him that he was scarcely behaving in the manner appropriate to a formal call, and he made a heroic effort to speak. But his sudden flow of nonsense had dried up, and all the words which he desired to say were unspeakable, all which the social law demanded were beyond measure inane and foolish. At last a brilliant idea struck him.

"Do you believe in coincidences?" he

asked suddenly, telling himself that he must be cautious, very cautious.

"I know that they happen," she replied, with a smile at the odd form of the question. "Has one happened to you?"

Raymond actually blushed. "I shall ruin everything," he thought, "but I must tell her, I must tell her." He hesitated for a moment.

"No," he answered, "not to me, but to a great friend of mine." Oh, hoary artifice!

"Tell me all about it," she said.

"Well, he was a romantic person, this friend of mine," he said; "and he knew a man—a sculptor—who made a very beautiful statue. My friend—oh, it's an absurd, stupid story!—my friend went by chance into the sculptor's studio one fine morning, and straightway fell head over ears in love with this dead, stone figure: saw it when he was awake,

dreamed of it when he was asleep, was haunted, in fact, night and day by it."

His voice trembled a little, though he managed to keep up the indifferent note. Sibyl was looking at him now with a slightly startled expression in her eyes. Had she detected the time-honoured artifice already?

"Romantic person!" she said, with some disdain.

"Don't interrupt, please," said Raymond. "The point of the story is, that after my absurd friend had wandered everywhere, haunted by this extraordinary face, suddenly, in the most unlikely place in the world, he met its living image, as the sexton would say."

"Well, that's easily explained!" said Sibyl.

"Explained!" cried he.

"The person he met was the original of the statue, the sculptor's model."

“ Ah ! ” said Raymond, “ but she couldn’t be.”

“ Why not ? ” asked Sibyl calmly. And at this interesting moment Mrs. Egerton came through the French window of the drawing-room, and began to walk across the lawn.

“ It’s impossible,” he said ; “ it must have been a chance resemblance, unless——”

“ Yes ? ”

“ Unless the sculptor knew the lady, or saw her in the street.”

“ How very mysterious ! ” said Sibyl. “ It’s a very improbable story, though, surely ? ”

“ Isn’t it ? ” said Raymond gloomily.

“ And who was the sculptor ? ” she asked after a moment. I am not prepared to state with what intention she put this question.

“ Oh, the sculptor ! ” said Raymond with elaborate unconcern. “ His name

was . . . let me see,—yes, his name was Dunton, I think. But he has nothing to do with it.”

And then, suddenly, she began to laugh. “Another coincidence!” she cried.

“What do you mean?” said Raymond, leaning forward quickly.

“I know Mr. Dunton slightly,” she said.

“You know him!” cried Raymond. “Then you were—it was—he must have——”

“I hope your headache is better, Aunt Hilda,” said Sibyl.

VI

“So that explains it,” said Raymond, as he walked home. “Dunton was subconsciously dominated by the beauty of her dear face whilst he made his statue. He wouldn’t have had the insolence to make it like her purposely. Besides, it isn’t like her, and it’s unfinished; no one would recognise it but me. All the same, Dunton shall alter it.” Raymond frowned. The imperious autocracy of the lover was already his.

As he crossed his shorn, inglorious field he met the sexton. “Man of bones,” he said, “do you ever dance?”

“When I was a boy I was main quick at it,” replied the sexton.

“Then you shall dance with me,” said

Raymond. "The world is far too absurdly joyful for mere walking. Why, man! the whole affair is one vast harmony: the sky, the birds, the whispering trees—they are all members of the divine orchestra. And shall we not trip to their piping! Shall we not prove in saltatory wise our superiority to the worm and the snail? I protest that I will caper, O man of bones, till I am hamstrung by the stealthy steel of senility. I glow with a godlike fire; I begin to comprehend eternity; I laugh your outworn trade to scorn. It is such as I, O son of Adam, that shall reduce all sextons to insolvency."

The sexton listened to this rhapsody with an unmoved countenance. When it was ended he began to search in his pockets, and after awhile produced a little packet of dried leaves, which he held out towards Raymond.

"Here," he said.

“No, thank you,” said Raymond courteously; “I never touch it. It is a fine old custom, but I prefer to smoke.”

“Put it under yer pillow o’ nights,” said the sexton, still holding out the little packet.

Raymond stared at him for a moment, and then took it.

“I gathered ’em the other night,” said the sexton, “in the churchyard, when the moon was up. There ain’t nothin’ like ’em.”

Raymond began to laugh. “Delightful pagan!” he cried: “you are like a breath of the Golden Age. I wonder if you used the same incantation as the girl in Theocritus. Did you? But—I’m dense, I know—would you be so kind as to tell me what the charm is for?”

The sexton shook his head and began to walk away. “Put ’em under yer pillow,” he reiterated: “there’s a vast of good in ’em.”

“But why? In Hecate’s name, why?”
Raymond cried.

The retreating sexton turned round, looked at Raymond solemnly, and tapped his forehead thrice with his bony first finger. Then he hurried away at a great pace. Raymond contemplated the packet in his hand.

“I rather agree with you, my friend,”
he said at length.

VII

“Oh, most magnificent world! Oh, wonderful life! The wildest optimists have only praised you faintly,” said Raymond, as he walked swiftly to the Rectory for the fourth time that week. “And yet, in an hour this glorious world may have changed to a rotten husk, seething with horrors. Dare I risk it? She knows: I’ll swear she knows! I’ll be cautious, though—awfully cautious. Bah! what a presumptuous ass am I! Can she stoop to such a poor fool? Can her eyes grow pitiful over such a grotesque lunatic? Can they? Of course they can; their possibilities of tenderness are as unlimited as God’s catalogue of

stars. I'll risk all to-day—by Heaven I will ! ”

The wild roses were all abloom in the hedges, and above the grass the air wavered like fine transparent flame. June had wedded spring to summer, and the whole earth joined in their nuptial revel. The sun was like a wonderful golden island set in a lake of sapphire, and in a lake of sapphire floated the little anchored argosies of cloud. Who could despond on such a triumphant day ? Not Raymond, at any rate. He hurried on towards the Rectory, godlike, with his foolish head in the air, and was half-way across the field and all the way to dream-land before a sound of voices recalled him abruptly to actuality.

His heart, pleased to observe an occasion when it might avenge itself for a long condition of dormancy, began to beat with vehemence. Sibyl was coming across the field with Theodore, who was

clad in flannels and carried a cricket bag. They were walking very quickly, and as they drew near it became evident that Theodore was expostulating with his sister. He was very red and warm, and she appeared to be somewhat breathless.

“My dear girl,” Raymond heard him say, “you had much better stop. You’ll only get a sunstroke, or apoplexy, or something.”

“I don’t care,” replied Sibyl: “I said I could do it, and I will.” Her mouth was a delightful line of obstinacy.

“You had better not look,” she said to Raymond as they came up to him. “We are both very hot and very cross, and it is all through Theodore’s abominable pride.”

“Oh, hang it all!” said the Reverend Theodore elegantly: “you began it by saying that you could walk to the station quicker than I could. You said I wasn’t in good condition. You ordered the

dogcart to be sent away whilst I was changing. I like your explanations."

He threw his bag to the ground and lay down suddenly at full length. "There's some time yet before the train goes, after all," said he. "No, thanks; I don't smoke publicly in the parish. Bishop thinks it corrupts the morals of the old women."

"Let me implore you to postpone your walking match till this day six months," said Raymond. "My heart bled for you both."

"We trespass still, you see," said Sibyl, "although there's no grass for us to spoil."

"I invited you to trespass," said Raymond; "but running races will be visited with all the torments of the law. I shall put up a notice-board about it."

"Well, we will promise not to do it again," she said,—“till this day six months, at any rate.”

“Thank goodness!” said Theodore. “Six months’ training will make a lot of difference. And now that it is over, I don’t mind admitting that you did set an abominably fast pace. I think I will go on now; I don’t want to have to hurry. Good-bye. See that she goes home and rests, Raymond.”

He picked up his bag and departed. Raymond and Sibyl watched him for a while, and then strolled slowly towards the Rectory.

Raymond’s heart was strangely stirred. Now was the time—now or never! Yet he could find no words. His soul was full of marvellous eloquence, but his tongue turned traitor, and refused to translate it into fervid speech. He racked his brains for a long time, for dreadful ages as it seemed to him, but the effort was quite fruitless.

Sibyl broke the silence. “Isn’t it a lovely day?” she said.

“Exquisite: the best I have ever known,” said the unhappy Raymond.

A long pause followed. He grew desperate. “And the roses,—aren’t they splendid?” he said.

“Lovely,” assented Sibyl.

Another silence, then Raymond clutched desperately at straws of small talk.

“Your brother looked quite distressed,—that’s the technical expression, isn’t it?”

“Good!” she cried. “You reform. I begin to have hopes of you, though you don’t know the difference between a crease and a cover-point.”

“Didn’t know it,” he corrected.

“Don’t know it,” she said severely. “For you don’t, do you?”

“I know that they are different,” said Raymond feebly. “Do listen to that lark!”

“Miserable evasion!” she cried, laughing. Then she asked suddenly, “Have

you heard anything more of Mr. Dunton's friend?"

Raymond's ridiculous heart began to beat fast. Fate had given him a chance; it must be taken. But he would go warily; a rash step might ruin everything.

"I have been studying his sad case with extreme interest," he answered.

"Oh, indeed," she said.

He glanced at her face, and was bewildered by its expression. Surely laughter was lurking in the demure corners of her mouth. What in the world could laughter betoken?

"Shall you see him again soon?" was her next question.

"Very soon," answered Raymond promptly.

She looked at him for a moment. "How is your book getting on?" she said.

"Not a bit," he replied.

"I'm afraid you are idle."

"It's not that."

"Has the flow of inspiration ceased?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, "and I'll tell you why. I can't get the thought of that poorchap out of my head."

"What do you mean?" she cried.

"You know," he said—"the fellow who saw Dunton's statue. Oh! I know the story bores you: I've noticed how you have changed the subject whenever I began to talk about him. But you mentioned him to-day of your own accord, you know."

"I think it is a very interesting case," said Sibyl.

"Then why do you avoid discussing it?" he asked.

She made a gesture of disdain. "It's all over and done with," she said airily.

"Oh!" cried Raymond. "Poor fellow! doesn't he wish it was!"

"But it is," she insisted. "I don't see why you worry about it. He met the original, didn't he?"

"Oh yes, he met her," said Raymond. "Of course she wasn't really the original, you know. He met her; that's his tragedy."

"Tragedy?" she asked.

"Farce if you like. She was a goddess, and he was only a wretched slave."

"That was his point of view, I suppose? He told you that."

"It was my point of view also," said the cunning Raymond.

Her eyes fell.

"Can't you give me any advice for him?" he asked. He was not smiling now.

"I should advise you to tell him that——" she began.

"Yes?" he cried eagerly.

"Goddesses have been known to stoop," she said.

"Only to Endymions," he replied fatuously; for hope was knocking at his heart, and the noise sent his wits a-wandering.

"I won't argue with you about the classics, but I think there are other examples," she said. Her eyes did not challenge him again.

Raymond looked round him. They were now close to the gate. "She will never know his romance," he said mournfully.

"Surely he could tell it to her?" said Sibyl.

"Ah! she would laugh at him. It's too improbable, too utterly romantic," he answered. "But——"

"Well?"

"He might—I think it's improbable that he would keep his head, but if he was very cautious he might try to tell it to her in some indirect way."

"Yes, that is a good idea," she said.

“You think so?” cried Raymond.
“Well, how should you advise him to act?”

“Oh! you can’t expect me to advise him,” she murmured.

“A suggestion from an entirely disinterested person would be especially valuable.”

“He might tell it to her in the—in the form of a story.”

“A story!” he cried, standing still.

“As if it had happened to some one else.”

“Yes?” he said breathlessly, “to some one else.”

“A friend of his, for instance,” she said softly. And then she looked up into his eyes. “She would soon guess the truth, I think,” she added.

VIII

"It is the most wonderful thing that has ever happened. It beats all history, and fiction has never approached it," said Raymond.

They were sitting together in the Rectory garden, about an hour after the events hinted at in the last chapter.

Sibyl smiled. She looked extraordinarily happy. "It is a very fine compliment to Mr. Dunton, at any rate," she said.

"Oh! but it wasn't really in the least like you," said Raymond.

"Now, why do you persist in saying that?" she asked. "I thought it was very good. Mr. Dunton thought so too."

Raymond suddenly sat bolt upright in his chair.

“You thought it was very good?” he repeated, staring at her. “You have seen it! Do you mean to say that Dunton had the impertinence to show it to you?”

“Impertinence!” she cried. “Oh, your critical faculty is too keen! It may not be a great work of art, but you must admit that it is very like me.”

“There is certainly a kind of distant resemblance,” Raymond admitted; “but how you could allow——” He paused suddenly.

Sibyl began to be slightly impatient. “I suppose you are trying to pay me an elaborate compliment, Raymond,” she said. It was the first time that she had called him by his Christian name, and he forgot his perplexity in joy for a moment.

“One cannot compliment perfection,

my sweetheart," he said. "But don't you think that Dunton showed rather a lack of taste in not altering the face?"

"In not altering it?" she cried. "Why? Why?"

Raymond writhed. "It was still a little like you when I saw it," he ventured to say.

She echoed his words again.

"A little like me!" she cried. "I should think it ought to have been like me!"

"*Je ne vois pas la nécessité,*" said Raymond.

"You have a poor opinion of Mr. Dunton, evidently."

"Not at all," he answered: "I think it is wonderfully good, considering that he did it from memory."

"Absurd!" she cried. "I sat for it to him—for a whole weary fortnight. And my foot used to go to sleep every day."

“ *What?* ” cried Raymond, horror-stricken. “ You sat for it ? ”

“ Yes, of course,” she said. “ Are you still trying to work out your wonderful compliment ? You don’t really imagine, do you, that Mr. Dunton did it all from memory ? ”

Raymond pulled himself together with a tremendous effort. “ There’s some mistake, dear,” he said : “ the figure that I saw was—couldn’t have been you. It’s impossible.”

“ Well, he only did one of me,” said Sibyl ; “ it must have been the one which you saw. But we can easily prove it. I was sitting in an old-fashioned chair, and my arms were resting on its arms.”

“ What kind of a chair ? ” cried Raymond eagerly.

“ If you must know,” she replied, “ it was one of the kind you can buy in Italy. They are supposed to be copies

of a chair belonging to Savonarola. They fold up, and a wooden ring is turned out of the block of wood which forms the arm, and hangs from it so that you can play with it as you sit there."

"A Florentine chair, in fact," said Raymond.

"Savonarola lived in Florence, I believe," she replied.

"Good heavens!" muttered Raymond between his teeth. "Good heavens!"

"Oh! it's very charming of you to pretend that it wasn't good enough for me," she said, with a touch of petulance; "but don't you think we might talk about something else?"

Raymond stared at her in a dazed kind of way. "Sitting in a Florentine chair!" he gasped. "Oh! there's some mistake, I know. But how abominable of Dunton!"

He sat gazing silently at the grass for

some time. Sibyl began to feel annoyed and slightly bewildered.

“Something appears to be distressing you,” she said. “Would you kindly explain why Mr. Dunton merits being called abominable?”

Raymond roused himself from his meditations, and gave a little vexed laugh. “I can’t, dear—I really can’t,” he answered; “and an absurd reason prevents me from telling you why. There! let us talk of other things. I’ll explain my extraordinary behaviour to you in the dark future. The future isn’t dark for us, though, is it?”

And so they talked of matters far too nebulous to concern the historian of dry fact. Raymond, however, seemed to have lost some of his gaiety, and Sibyl was conscious that his expression of adoration changed occasionally to one of deep perplexity. But she gave no hint that she had observed this change, although she

resolved to discover its meaning before their engagement was many days old. After a while, too, Mrs. Egerton came out, and in the first glorious sensations of a mutual duplicity the little cloud of doubt which had arisen in the lovers' sunshine was forgotten. They had agreed to keep the engagement a secret until Theodore returned.

Raymond remembered it, however, as he walked home, and the memory somewhat tempered his complacency.

"It's strange," he said to himself as he crossed the meadow—"infernally strange. I know that I shall be compelled to kick Dunton, and yet he is not the kind of fellow whom one would count a cad. There must be some mistake. To put her head on a—a statue like that! To put that statue in a copy of the very chair in which she, apparently, had posed for him! Confound it! she must have thought me a fool; but how

could I explain? There is an explanation which I don't know, therefore I should have wronged Dunton, and in any case I should only have made her uncomfortable. What can I do? I know: I'll write to Charles."

And he did so as soon as he reached the cottage. The letter ran as follows:

"DEAR CHARLES,—

"Thank you for your letter. The weather here is splendid. I want to know if it is Arthur's usual custom to carve the faces of his masterpieces in the likeness of his friends and acquaintance. If this is the case, my dear fellow, I should advise you to dissuade him from the habit, as it might be awkward, to put it mildly, for the unconscious models and their relatives. I have already met some one who knows him,—only slightly, I think,—yet he has copied her features in the face of his

woman sitting in a Florentine chair. When he returns, advise him to give the latter a moustache or some wrinkles. That kind of thing, sir, doesn't do. The novelist who makes his friends play ignoble parts in his book is no worse than your villain of a brother. But don't tell him that I wrote to you about this. A slight hint, I know, will be enough to make him realise the enormity of his behaviour."

"That's all right!" he said, with a sigh of relief, as he addressed the envelope. "Now Arthur will swear at Charles, but privately take the hint. It's much better so than if I spoke to him, for he would find out that I am going to marry Sibyl, and would be wretched with repentance ever after. Now there'll be no more trouble, and I won't tell Sibyl anything until we are married. Poor Arthur! perhaps he fell

in love with her,—I can't imagine any man in his senses doing anything else,—and immortalised a hopeless passion by his art. After all, he didn't exhibit the statue; it had obviously never been out of the studio when I saw it. Yes, I will be lenient, very lenient, with Arthur, for that is a most probable explanation. And yet,—Oh! It was a vile thing to do, in any case, and I shall tell him so, unless he takes Charles' hint pretty promptly. And Charles is such a fool; he is perfectly certain to make a mess of the whole thing. As soon as Arthur comes back I'll go and see him myself; and meanwhile I won't worry about it any more. What are such foolish trifles to him who has won Life's greatest prize? I'm an idiot, a soulless idiot: when I should be soaring amongst the stars I wallow in commonplaces. Wallow no more, Raymond, you ass, but admire your own extraordinary triumphs."

He dismissed the memory of Dunton's statue from his mind for the rest of the evening,—and, indeed, for the next day, which was an absurdly happy period. But it came back enclosed with Charles Dunton's reply by return of post. Charles Dunton's conscience was so abnormal as to be regarded as a disease by his friends.

“DEAR CURZON,” (wrote Charles,) “I must tell you frankly that I don't understand your letter; and as you have Arthur's studio key, you had better come up to town so that we can go to the studio together and make certain that we both mean the same statue. Personally, I have no doubt (if you mean the unfinished undraped female figure sitting in a Florentine chair with her hands clasping her right knee) that you have seen the model who sat for him, for the whole statue, face, limbs, and all,

is a portrait of the girl who treated him so badly. And this must be the one you mean, for to my certain knowledge he had no other female figure in his studio. If you *have* met the girl, beware: women are a snare, *crede experto*, and she is undeniably beautiful, and has fascinating manners. So, Curzon, has that amiable reptile the cobra-di-capella. I say again, beware. It looks like rain this evening, but the glass continues to rise.

“Yours truly,

“CHARLES DUNTON.”

“Idiot! idiot!” cried Raymond savagely. “*Crede experto*, indeed, as if any woman ever looked twice at him, the prig! This becomes ghastly, though. Dunton’s model must be some one who bears an extraordinary resemblance to—— Oh, the god of coincidence is far too conscientious!”

IX

By this time Mrs. Egerton, Theodore, and the Boy had been told the great surprising news. They did not appear, however, to be greatly surprised ; indeed, they treated the affair with a smiling tolerance that seemed to Raymond, and possibly to Sibyl, to be exceedingly inappropriate to such a joyful yet solemn event. The Boy, especially, acquired a habit of melting into mirth at frequent intervals, much to his sister's annoyance. But at all events the brothers and the aunt contrived to disappear mysteriously during the greater part of the day ; and so Raymond, when he reached the Rectory soon after he had received the letter of the impeccable Charles, found

Sibyl sitting alone in the garden. When she saw him she rose quickly, and I regret to record that she was so lost to all sense of dignity as to run towards him.

“Sorry to have to pay another morning call,” said Raymond.

“It is a nuisance,” said Sibyl; “but I suppose I must ask you to sit down. Do please remember that even Rectories have windows. Perhaps if you moved those chairs,—it is shadier behind the tree. That’s better. Why, Raymond!” she cried suddenly.

“Yes,” he said, “what is the matter? Am I not as beautiful as you dreamed before I came? Say so, if you like. Don’t mind my poor heart.”

“You look worried—yes, actually worried,” she said, after inspecting him carefully. “I believe you have been thinking. Now, remember, I forbid you to do it again, under pain of all sorts

of torments. If you cease to be irresponsible you will begin to be dreadful. And now tell me what is the matter."

"Oh, it's nothing," said Raymond. "Worried? Good heavens! How could I be worried when I have nothing to think about but you?"

"I am not sure that you are not sometimes a clever man," said Sibyl; "but I must tell you frankly that prevarication is not in your line. What have you been doing this morning?"

"Oh, thinking of you, and smoking, and dawdling over a book," said the happy lover airily. "By the way, I've been reading rather an interesting book, though as a matter of fact it was sent to me for review."

"What is it about?" asked Sibyl.

"About spooks, and phantasms, and doubles. I say, Sibyl, do you believe that theory about every one in the world having a double somewhere?"

Sibyl contemplated him severely for some moments, then she said icily, "So that is it! I see now why you look worried. Book, indeed! I don't believe you opened one this morning. You were thinking about doubles. And I must admit that it is a very grave question."

"What do you mean, dear?" he asked, looking rather guilty.

"It's all plain enough now," she said. "And I see why you made such a fuss about that absurd statue of Mr. Dunton's."

"Dunton's statue?" he cried, staring at her.

"Yes," she answered. "Now confess. You fell in love with the statue, and then you fell in love with me because I was like it; and now you are beginning to wonder whether, after all, I sufficiently realise your ideal. You are wondering, in fact, whether there may not be some

one else in the world who is more like it than I am, though I sat for it. Aren't you ? aren't you ? Of course you are."

"My dear Sibyl," Raymond said, taking her hand, "that's rather unkind, don't you think ? Especially as I know that you didn't sit for my statue."

"Then why drag me into the matter ?" said Sibyl, withdrawing her hand from his. "You had better go and look for the original, since you persist in asserting that I am not that happy person."

"Oh the perversity of women !" cried Raymond. "I can't explain ; let's drop the subject. Wait a moment, though," he added suddenly : "I heard something this morning which I might tell you, and the rest you will know—some time."

"I hope so," said Sibyl. "I am devoured by wild curiosity." She pretended to yawn. "Tell me as little as you like," she added.

Raymond hesitated for some time,

then he said, "I heard from Dunton's brother this morning."

Sibyl looked wearily up at the sky. "I commend the promptness of his reply," she said.

"Eh? How did you know that I had written to him?" asked the foolish Raymond.

"Women are not always quite senseless," she answered. "And what did Mr. Dunton's brother say about me?" A faint flush crept over her face.

"He said nothing about you, of course," said Raymond. "I wrote to him about—about the statue which made me love you, and for which you think you sat."

"For which I sat," said Sibyl calmly.

Raymond laughed uneasily. "Absurd child!" he said. "Forgive me for smiling: you will smile over this yourself some day. The real model for that statue wasn't nearly so charming as you."

"I suppose Mr. Charles Dunton de-

scribed her lack of charm to you at some length ? ” said Sibyl slowly.

“ Well, not exactly ; but he told me enough about her for me to realise that I need not renounce you in order to hunt for her ; so don’t be alarmed, dear.”

“ Try not to be stupid, Raymond. What did the wonderful Mr. Charles say ? ”

“ Well, he said that she was not so—not so nice as she was beautiful. But we won’t talk about her, Sibyl. She has no part in our story.”

“ I want to hear about her,” said Sibyl. There was a curious light in her eyes. “ What else did Mr. Charles tell you ? ”

“ He told me,” said Raymond, smiling, “ that she was once engaged to his brother.”

Sibyl raised her eyebrows, and assumed an air elaborately unconcerned ; then she said calmly, “ Mr. Charles has got up his facts excellently.”

“What do you mean, Sibyl?” asked Raymond. “Do you know the story already?”

“I know that it’s quite true,” said Sibyl. “I am not so nice as I am beautiful. I was engaged to Mr. Dunton. But as I intended to tell you so this morning, you might have spared yourself the trouble of writing to that man.”

Raymond was ghost-like, horror-stricken. “Sibyl! You’re joking,” he cried.

“Not at all,” said Sibyl, her anger rising. “I don’t see anything particularly amusing or important in the fact that I was once engaged to some one. If I were engaged now it might be different, but we broke it off—long ago—as soon as he had finished the statue.”

“The statue!” cried Raymond wildly, “the statue! You were right after all: the mistake was mine. Good heavens!—I mean, good morning, Miss Dalrymple!”

And the extraordinary young man rose, and walked rapidly away without even glancing at her.

Sibyl observed his retreat calmly. "And I really thought that he had a sense of humour," she murmured, as he disappeared through the gateway. "But he will recover very soon. How absurd, how utterly absurd! As if being engaged years ago could make any difference. But I should like to see Mr. Charles Dunton. He would amuse me."

She did not smile, however, as she walked towards the house.

X

NOR did Raymond smile as he walked homeward. He was too bewildered to realise the full extent of his misery, but he knew that the sun was extinguished, the birds dumb, the stars dead in the humbled heavens. Life had nothing left of its fairness; it was become a monotonous disease; the earth itself was but a horrid excrescence on the foolish face of chaos.

Was ever a more damnatory chain of evidence? Was she not self-convicted? And yet it was impossible, flagrantly impossible. He called himself all the hard names in dead and living languages for daring to think her to blame; he cursed the family of Dunton with un-

tiring fervour ; he tramped his room all night with ruffled hair and clenched fists. It was a pretty transformation for a cynic philosopher.

And the end of it all was as Sibyl had foreseen. He went to the Rectory early next morning, his head aching with remorse and self-contempt, his heart full of the love which had conquered his most foolish suspicion.

The country maiden who opened the door made a vast effort to look ingenuous when she said that Miss Sibyl was not at home. Raymond tried to appear unconcerned, and asked for Mrs. Egerton. The maid looked doubtful, but Raymond came into the hall and took possession of a chair, proceeding to the drawing-room as soon as she disappeared upstairs.

One glance at Mrs. Egerton's face told him that she had been in Sibyl's confidence.

"Is it so very serious?" he asked

airily; but his eyes were haggard and anxious.

“Oh! don’t look like that, my dear boy!” said Mrs. Egerton briskly. “No; I think it might easily be worse. Only this isn’t like the usual lovers’ quarrel: quarrels are healthy—they clear the air of stale sentiment, and make room for fresh; but generally, you know, there is either no reason for them at all, or else some absurdly obvious one. Your little affair doesn’t seem to fall quite naturally into either of these groups. Sibyl herself—you won’t hate me for listening to her very fragmentary confidences, will you?—Sibyl said that you were first of all angry because she was like the statue that Mr. Dunton made of her, and secondly because she was once engaged to Mr. Dunton. Your first objection seems to me mere nonsense, the very subtlest kind of jealousy; and your second is equally unreasonable. Now,

confess,—aren't you really angry because she didn't tell you about this engagement before ? ”

“ Oh, that's nothing,” said Raymond disdainfully.

“ I see that I am right,” said Mrs. Egerton. “ Now listen to me, and don't interrupt. The engagement only lasted for a week : it was palpably absurd from the outset, for she was a mere child ; and though Mr. Dunton is no doubt a great artist, his life is just a little irregular, isn't it ? I'm not gossiping now, mind you, for I know all the details of the affair. Why, it was I who broke off the engagement ! ”

“ You ? ” said Raymond.

“ Even I,” answered Mrs. Egerton. “ And for the very good reason that Mr. Dunton was already engaged to some one else, and had not troubled to break it off. His defence was that he had forgotten all about it. No ; Mr. Dunton is a

charming person, doubtless, but in these matters he is a little untrustworthy."

"Let me interrupt you for a moment," said Raymond. "Was it during their engagement that this statue was made?"

"They became engaged when it was nearly finished," said the lady.

"And how long ago was this?"

"Four years ago," answered Mrs. Egerton.

"Four years!" cried Raymond.

"Have you ever seen it?"

"Certainly I have," she answered, smiling at this absurd question.

"Ah! what a fool I have been!" he said irrelevantly. Then he asked, "What do you think of it?"

"It is a very good portrait of her as she was then. She was only seventeen, though, and girls alter."

"Thank you," said Raymond. "I have made a ghastly mistake. I can't explain: if I told you what it was you

would never speak to me any more. I must go to London at once. You'll try and make my peace with her, won't you?" he added, taking her hand.

"Of course," she said; but she looked a little doubtful.

"What is it?" asked Raymond.

"I'll do my best," said Mrs. Egerton, "but Sibyl has a curious nature. She will probably resent my interference, as I can't explain why you behaved in that extraordinary way. You had much better see her now,—I'll manage that,—or else tell me the whole story, and let me repeat to her as much as I think she ought to hear."

"You are awfully kind," he said gratefully, "but I can't explain either to you or to her. I can only beg her mercy. Explanation would ruin all chance of it."

"I am sorry to hear that," said Mrs. Egerton—"very sorry; for, though I hate to discourage you, she is very much hurt

about this, and unless you can explain fully, I am afraid that your pardon may be——”

“Hopeless?” he cried.

“We will say deferred,” she said. “Don’t be too despondent: she loves you, I know.”

“God bless her!” he cried suddenly.

“We women, Raymond,” Mrs. Egerton continued, “have two very vulnerable spots in our natures—our pride and our curiosity; and you have contrived to touch both with your mystery. Take an old woman’s advice: confess everything; clear up the mystery, even if it wounds her pride a little more. Time is a cunning healer. Ah! see her now!”

“I can’t—I daren’t,” he answered. “I must go to London first. Oh! some day I’ll explain everything; meanwhile try to impart some of your kindness to her. I shall need it—yes, I shall need it very greatly.”

He gripped her hands, and then went out quickly by the window, leaving Mrs. Egerton in a fine atmosphere of melodrama.

"A most mysterious young man," said that lady, as she went upstairs.

She found Sibyl sitting by her window with an open book in her lap.

"I have had a caller," said Mrs. Egerton cheerfully.

"What barbarian presumed to call at such an hour?" asked Sibyl, with a smile. "It is but lately daybreak."

"Can't you guess, dear?" said her aunt.

"Certainly not," said Sibyl. "It is a form of mental stupidity that I always sedulously avoid."

"Well," said Mrs. Egerton, sinking into a chair, "it was Mr. Raymond."

"Who is he?" asked Sibyl, raising her eyebrows.

"Mr. Curzon, dear. How absurd you are!"

“ Oh, Mr. Curzon,” said Sibyl, with magnificent indifference. “ Of course : I saw him going away. What a silly hat he wears ! ”

“ Oh ! bother his hat,” said Mrs. Egerton, with energy. “ His heart is the important thing, and it is in the right place, at any rate.”

“ Indeed ? ” said Sibyl : “ did he permit you to listen to it ? ”

“ Now, Sibyl, this isn’t like you. You know you really care about him. And I have come up on purpose——”

“ Care about him ! ” cried Sibyl : “ I think he is a very foolish and tedious person. He is always trying painfully to be eccentric. I don’t want to see him any more, thank you.” She drawled the last sentence, and took up her book. “ If you came upstairs with the purpose of praising him, auntie,” she added, “ another flight will doubtless add to your eloquence. Go and praise him to

Theodore. He is writing a sermon in the study."

Lest he should be disturbed in the composition of spiritual comfort, the Reverend Theodore occupied a large room at the top of the house.

Mrs. Egerton shrugged her shoulders, and, disregarding her niece's advice, went downstairs as angry as she had ever been in her life. But a noise in Sibyl's room restored a portion of her usual good-humour.

"That's all right," she said: "at any rate she has thrown away her wretched novel. And now let us hope that she will cry herself to reason."

Having uttered this vindictive sentence, the disappointed peacemaker went out to scold the gardener.

XI

"You may call me just as many names as you please," said Charles Dunton, "but I assure you that I stick to my assertion. The girl you met was the same who sat to Arthur. Why, according to your account, she practically admitted it herself. How on earth you can have any doubt about it I can't think."

Raymond was pacing up and down the neat, ugly room.

"I tell you it's impossible!" he said. "You have made some damnable mistake. She is the noblest woman in the world. Man, man! her very environment makes the idea flagrantly absurd. She's a clergyman's sister."

"Well, Lucrezia Borgia was closely related to a clergyman too," said Charles, "and I'm not aware that the relationship had a particularly good effect upon her either."

"This is not the time for vulgar jesting," said Raymond.

"I am never vulgar," replied Charles with dignity. "What's the matter now? If you told me the name of the girl I might be enlightened a little."

"Nothing shall induce me to do anything of the kind," said Raymond savagely. "You have got me into a horrible mess, and I don't propose to reward your wretched curiosity. Observe that I am so convinced, however, that she had nothing to do with Arthur's model that I don't even trouble to ask you the name of the latter. And now put on your hat and come round to the studio."

Charles protested feebly. "The rain,

my dear Curzon; and I have several engagements."

"They can't be as important as mine," said Raymond. "It's no use—you have got to come." He rang the bell. "Call a hansom," he said when Charles' manservant appeared.

"This is really extremely inconvenient," spluttered Charles.

"Have a cigar?" said Raymond.

"I don't smoke. And look here, Curzon, I'm not going to——"

"Refuse to make amends for your idiocy," said Raymond, and thrust him into a coat with the rapidity and ease of a detective handcuffing a criminal.

It was only a short drive to the studio. They found the sheeted figures covered with a thick deposit of dust, and the spiders had woven wonderful nets on windows and ceiling. Arthur Dunton had a horror of charwomen, and allowed no sanitary measures to be taken in

the studio except under his personal supervision.

"Now!" cried Raymond, and whirled a sheet from a large figure.

It proved to be a panther crouching for its spring.

"Take care! for Heaven's sake take care!" cried Charles, coughing lamentably as a huge cloud of dust arose from the sheet. "If you break anything Arthur will kill us both."

"That's not it," said Raymond, hurling the sheet at the glaring panther, so that it hung ridiculously round his neck. "But this is!" he cried, tugging violently at the cerements of another figure.

The sheet came away suddenly, and he tossed it towards Charles, who already exhibited all the symptoms of acute suffocation.

"There she is!" he cried. Then, seizing Charles, who was struggling with

the sheet, he dragged him forward. "Now explain," he said, gripping his arm. "Why was the face of the girl I met put on that abominable figure? It's disgraceful! Explain! If you don't, I'll pound the whole thing to powder."

"Don't be violent, for goodness' sake," said Charles feebly, wiping the dust from his eyes. Then he blinked at the statue. "Bless me! how very extraordinary!" he said, after a moment of inspection.

"What! you made a mistake?" cried Raymond. "Confound you! If you knew the mess your miserable idiocy has caused, you would think nothing extraordinary but the fact that I don't murder you in the most painful manner possible."

"I have not made a mistake, Curzon," said Charles, stepping back and attempting to assume a haughty air. "What I told you is perfectly true. This statue

is a portrait of the girl who behaved so disgracefully. Only . . .”

“Well?” said Raymond.

“Only the face has been altered slightly. How was I to know that? You had the key, and it appears to have made a fool of you. But the extraordinary thing is that the new head distinctly resembles that of a lady of our acquaintance. Rather indiscreet of Arthur, I must say.”

“Very,” assented Raymond. “And the lady’s name is Miss Dalrymple?”

“How did you know that?” cried Charles. Then comprehension shone in his blinking eyes. “Of course! the girl you met—the parson’s sister! Well, I’m——no, I’m not; but it certainly is somewhat remarkable.”

“Remarkable!” cried Raymond: “I should think it is; and oh, what a fool I have been! what a suspicious, base, and altogether abominable cad!

How shall I ever look her in the face again ? ”

“ Oh ! that’s the way the land lies, is it ? ” said the sapient Charles. “ Well, I happen to know something about Miss Dalrymple.”

“ Miss Dalrymple’s name is sacred ! I forbid you to mention it,” said Raymond sternly. “ I suppose you are going to sneer at her because she wouldn’t marry Arthur. You needn’t trouble to do so, however ; in fact, if you do, I shall be compelled to kill you. I know that she was engaged to him.”

“ My dear fellow, what woman wasn’t ? ” said Charles. “ I don’t blame her : to be Arthur’s *fiancée* is the common failing of the sex. But what I was going to tell you about her is this : Arthur did a portrait of her some years ago——”

“ Of course ! Sitting in a Florentine chair ! ”

“ Oh ! you’ve seen it, then ? ”

“In this Florentine chair,” cried Raymond: “I see everything now, and it is as I thought. Why, in Heaven’s name, did I jump to conclusions with the agility of a springbok? Why am I alive?”

“I’m sure I can’t inform you,” said Charles: “considering this atmosphere, it is wonderful. Let us go, let us go; I am already poisoned.”

“By all means,” said Raymond. “Good-bye,” he added, when they had reached the door; “I must catch a train. You have played a knavish part, but I forgive you. I forgive everybody. See you again some time.” And he leapt into the hansom, shouting the name of a station to the driver.

Charles Dunton stared feebly at his departing wheels. “He forgives me!” he said. “Forgives *me*! Bah!”

XII

RAYMOND reached his little wayside station as the sun set, and having sent on his bag by an opportune carrier's cart, began to walk homeward. The road was deep with dust, and as soon as possible he turned aside into a labyrinth of lanes,—tortuous aisles of blossom, where the wild roses and the hawthorn grew in unpruned luxuriance. But fairness of flower and splendour of sunset brought no joy to him on that evening; self-contempt and most bitter remorse dominated his unhappy heart, and cast his eyes earthward. He found a faint comfort, however, in soliloquising after his usual manner.

“Raymond, my friend,” he said, “you

always had a suspicion that you were a fool, and now you may add to that suspicion the certain knowledge of your being that fine flower of modernity, a cad. And the worst of it is that you are continuing to blossom: no one but a cad would come back here. You have insulted her mortally, and your one chance of redemption would lie in going away for ever. What right had you to crawl back? You are unworthy to speak to her, to look at her; your very proximity is the vilest of insults. Oh! why couldn't you have displayed the last decency? Why couldn't you go away to a desert island and hunt hippopotami?"

Having reviled himself thus, he plodded joylessly onward, his brow knitted, his eyes fixed on the ground. Soon he continued his soliloquy. "If I dare tell her! If I dare confess all! She would forbid me ever to see her again, but at least I should have made

some effort at atonement. But I can't : the truth would be a hideous insult, and would make her utterly wretched. But couldn't I tell her half the truth ? Surely she would see that there was some excuse—that my mind wasn't wholly loathsome ? No, there is no excuse, not the tiniest particle. I'm a brute and a cad, and my last words to her prove it. Oh ! if I could kill Dunton I believe that I should feel better ! ”

He had just enunciated this truculent desire when a faint sound from somewhere near the road brought him to a sudden halt.

“ It sounded like a moan,” he said. “ Or did some one overhear me and chuckle ? ”

He stood listening. The sound was repeated ; it certainly did not seem to be expressive of much mirth.

The place where he had halted was a grassy oval into which the lane widened

after descending a short steep hill. On one side of it was a small coppice of beeches, and it was from within this, apparently, that the sounds proceeded. Raymond went to the edge of the coppice and peered in.

“Who is there?” he said fatuously. There was no answer. He stood quite still for some time, during which there was no repetition of the sound; then he put it down to his imagination, and was about to depart, when suddenly a stifled groan arose near him.

“Aha!” said Raymond, displaying a lamentable ignorance of country life: “some poacher caught in his own snares, I expect. But let us investigate.” And he parted the boughs and entered the coppice.

A gleam of metal caught his eye, and he made for it. On the thick carpet of black beech-husks lay a bicycle, with its front wheel bent into a zigzag never

dreamed of by its maker. The tyre, too, was half torn from the wheel-rim, and most of the spokes had partially severed their connection with the same.

“A picturesque ruin,” said Raymond; “but where, oh, where is the mangled proprietor? And why is it in the middle of a wood?”

He went on for a few yards, and then perceived a small distorted figure lying in a dry ditch. As he approached, the figure made a poor attempt to rise.

“Hullo! Are you badly hurt?” said Raymond, bending over it. Then he cried, “Why, it’s the Boy!”

And the Boy it undoubtedly was, though his identity was partially concealed by a cut on his forehead from which had flowed a disfiguring stream of gore. He was too weak and dizzy to stand, and must have fallen heavily but for Raymond’s arm.

“You poor old thing!” said Raymond.

“You have fairly outdone the renowned Humpty-Dumpty. How did you manage it? Sit down and tell me.”

Signs of shame were dimly indicated on the Boy's disordered countenance.

“I'm all right,” he said. “I only came off as I came down the hill. Go away: I shall be all right in a second.” He rubbed his eyes savagely.

“Now, my dear Boy,” said Raymond, “I have just as much right to be in this delightful wood as you have, and I choose to sit here,—*sub tegmine fagi*, as the poet whom you despise phrases it,—and enjoy the evening breezes. But tell me why you crawled here, instead of lying by the roadside like a respectable corpse.”

The Boy looked at the ground. “Didn't want any one to see me,” he muttered; “thought I'd rest here till I could walk back. But my leg has got all stiff.” He touched the sturdy limb with shrinking caution.

"Let me have a look at it," said Raymond.

"No. Don't touch it!" cried the Boy. "It's all right, Raymond; I promise you it's all right!"

"Now don't kick," said the inexorable Raymond, beginning to roll down the boy's stocking. "Where does it hurt?"

"Ankle," said the Boy.

Raymond took off his shoe very carefully, and removed the stocking altogether. The Boy made a gentle hissing sound.

"Sorry, old fellow," said Raymond.

"It didn't hurt," said the Boy, with a gasp.

The ankle was swollen enormously. Raymond took off his coat, and laid the Boy's leg very gently on it. He also took off his hat.

"Ugly things are invariably useful, Boy," he said. "I am going to get some water. If I find, when I come

back, that you have moved an inch, the Inquisition shall seem incarnate mildness, matched with the tortures I shall invent. Button your coat. Hullo! that arm looks remarkably wooden."

"I think p'raps I grazed it a little," said the Boy, looking miserably ashamed of himself.

Inspection of the arm proved that it had suffered a severe wrench, if nothing worse. The Boy set his teeth like a hero when Raymond touched it, but he could not quite stifle an exclamation of pain.

Raymond looked into his face. The Boy had Sibyl's eyes.

"What a brute I am!" said Raymond. "I know you hate me, and long to be left to die by yourself here. Now I'm going to get some water."

He returned in a few minutes, having filled his hat at a brook not far off. Then he made some bandages out of his

handkerchief, and having soaked them, he bound the bruised limbs and washed the wounded brow.

“And now,” he said, when this was done, “we will run home. How much do you weigh, Boy?”

“Seven stone three and three-quarters without any clothes on,” replied the Boy promptly. “Clothes add ten pounds.”

“Then I’ve a very good mind to make you take them all off,” said Raymond. “I’m going to carry you. Are you ready?”

“No; I can walk, Raymond, really—I can walk splendidly now!” protested the unhappy boy. How would he ever dare to face the world again if he were carried home like a wretched baby in arms?

“I daresay you can,” said the pitiless Raymond; “and so can a tortoise, but more quickly. Sir! do you think I want to arrive home with the early dews

of dawn? Even now the perfume of my dinner is wafted hither by the breeze of night. We must leave the bicycle here for the rust and moth to devour."

"Carry me on your back, then," said the boy. Even indignity had its various grades.

"No; you can't hold on properly," answered Raymond, and picked him up in his arms. "You are not exactly a ghost, Boy," he said, as he pushed through the branches. As soon as he reached the lane, however, he set off at a steady pace, and in a little while the absurd Boy fell asleep, with his ruffled yellow head leaning on Raymond's breast.

It was quite dark when they reached the Rectory gate. The boy still slept, the gate was stubborn, and Raymond had no hand free to grapple with it; so he shouted. The Boy stirred uneasily. A white figure came out into the dusk.

Raymond's heart began to beat furiously, and he remembered afterwards that he was absurdly afraid of the Boy hearing it and waking.

He called to the figure softly. "Sibyl!" he said.

"Is it you, Theodore?" she asked, as she came down the short drive. "Have you found him?" Then she recognised Raymond. "Oh!" she said; then, frigidly, "I thought it was Theodore. Have you heard——?" But as she spoke she caught sight of the bundle in his arms, and flung open the gate.

"You found him?" she said quickly, bending over to look at the Boy's pale face. "Oh! he's not dead?" she cried. Raymond was smarting at the coldness of his reception.

"Not quite," he replied, with horrible levity, "though you'd think so from his weight. He is a singularly heavy sleeper. Don't touch him, please: he is

a living bruise,—smashed by his bicycle. Let me carry him in.” And he strode unceremoniously past her.

“You found him and brought him back?” she asked, as she followed him.

“Only a few yards,” said Raymond curtly.

“Thank you,” she said. Her voice faltered a little. Evidently she had been very anxious about the Boy.

“Don’t,” he replied; “it was only common decency.”

She did not speak again. Raymond carried the Boy into the morning-room and laid him very gently on a couch. He inspected the bandage round his ankle in a businesslike manner, then turned to Sibyl.

“Good-night,” he said. “His left arm, left ankle, and forehead are hurt. Don’t forget. Don’t try to take the bandages off to-night, and don’t wake him if you can help it. He suffers a lot of pain.

He's the bravest man I know. Where is your brother ? ”

“ He has gone out to look for the Boy,” answered Sibyl. “ We were growing anxious because he didn't come in. Theodore went towards the river.” She shuddered.

“ I'll find him and send him to you,” said Raymond. “ Good-night.”

But just then Mrs. Egerton entered the room, and uttered a little cry of horror as she caught sight of the limp figure on the couch.

“ Sibyl ! is he badly hurt ? ” she cried, going quickly towards the Boy, who began to snore gently.

Raymond stepped in front of her.

“ I'm his doctor,” he said, with a smile, “ and I positively refuse to allow you to kiss him. He is sleeping splendidly. I found him near here in a crumpled condition, and But I'll give you the catalogue of his wounds in the hall.

Miss Dalrymple has heard it already, and she wants to be left alone with him, I know. Good-night," he added again to Sibyl, and stalked into the hall, meekly followed by the astonished Mrs. Egerton.

Sibyl, too, appeared to be somewhat surprised at this unceremonious departure. She stood for some moments looking at the door which Raymond had carefully closed. Suddenly a voice in the room made her start violently. Is it possible that she had forgotten the Boy?

"Sibyl!" said that graceless person, opening one eye with extreme caution.

She was on her knees beside him even as he spoke. "Oh, Cecil, Cecil!" she said, and putting her arm round his neck she began to sob.

The Boy was vastly discomfited by this strange proceeding. "It's all right—it's all right!" he reiterated, "Don't, please don't make that horrid noise in

your neck. I'm nearly well now. Oh, I wish you wouldn't!" he added in a tone of utter reproach as she kissed him. "You know I hate hugs."

"There! I won't hug you any more, Boy," said Sibyl, beginning to smile faintly. "We all thought you were lost or drowned, you know. I must go and tell Aunt Hilda that you are awake. Are you hungry?"

"Rather!" replied the Boy. "But you shan't go and tell Aunt Hilda anything." He caught her hand and held it tightly. "She'll come and snivel over me too," he said, with deep disgust.

"Well, we'll wait till she has finished talking to Mr. Curzon," said Sibyl.

"Why don't you call him Raymond?" asked the Boy. "You used to. I always do. I say, Sibyl," he went on, "I wasn't really asleep."

"You disgraceful hypocrite!" said his sister; "when did you wake?"

"Oh, when Raymond shouted at the gate. But I didn't let on, 'cause I knew you would all start hugging me," answered the Boy—"Theodore, and the cook, and all the rest of you. I call it beastly. I knew Raymond would keep you off all right if I pretended to be asleep. Raymond is a ripper. Oh! don't he tell stories, though?"

"He ought to be able to tell them; he is a writer," said Sibyl. "Tell me how you hurt yourself."

"I don't mean that kind of story, silly! How nice and soft your hair is, and it's all in little waves, just like Rover's. Raymond's stories are lies."

"Now, you mustn't talk like that," said Sibyl maternally. "Raymond—Mr. Curzon—has been very kind to you, and 'lies' is an ugly word for little boys to use late at night."

"Yes, that's what he tells lies about," explained the Boy. "His being kind,

and fagging along the road, I mean. He said he found me quite near here, and really it was close to Symonds' farm by the station."

"But Symonds' farm is four miles away!" cried Sibyl.

"Seven stone three and three-quarters," said the Boy solemnly; "and he fetched water in his new bowler with a pink silk lining. He is a ripper! I wouldn't mind carrying a chap if he couldn't walk, but I wouldn't spoil my hat for him, I know jolly well."

"There was once a gentleman," said Sibyl, "who carried fish from the river in a new straw, and the name of that wicked gentleman was——"

"Cecil Dalrymple, Esquire," said the unabashed Boy. "But that's different. The fish were for my supper. Look here, I want to say good-night to Raymond."

"I expect that he has gone," said his sister.

The Boy listened for a moment. "No, he hasn't," he said: "I can hear him talking in the porch. He's going now. Run after him—hurry up!"

Just then Mrs. Egerton came into the room.

"He is awake," said Sibyl, and went past her quickly.

"I wish to *goodness* you wouldn't, auntie!" she heard the Boy say with extreme testiness, as she closed the door.

Raymond had nearly reached the gate when he heard rapid feet following him down the drive. He turned, and this time the hope in his heart was actual pain. Whatever happened, he could keep up this cold pretence no longer.

"Miss Dalrymple!—Sibyl!" he said.

"Cecil wants to say good-night to you: he is awake," she said rather breathlessly.

To call the Boy by his real name

surely indicated that a frozen wall of formality had risen for ever between them. He followed her to the house without a word: there was no hope, after all, it seemed. The events of the evening had only served to complete his sense of her implacable resentment and of his own villainy. When he entered the morning-room he made a noble pretence of light-heartedness, but his face was white.

“Well, Boy,” he said, “you were stupid to go to sleep. You missed the joy of a journey through the air on my enchanted Arabian carpet. I shall never take you as a passenger again, though: enchanted carpets are only made for men of reasonable weight. The genii who held the corners were heard to hint that you were a disguised elephant.”

“It was awfully good of you to take me as a passenger,” said the Boy, shaking his hand violently; “I’ll do the same

for you some day. Do you think the bicycle will be all right? I'm afraid the silver will be spoilt."

"Oh, no!" answered Raymond. "I'll speak to the genii about it. Good-night, old fellow."

"Good-night, Raymond," said the Boy. "I say . . . don't let them hear: put your head closer. There! that's what I wanted to say," he added, after a moment's whisper, looking very red; "they would only laugh if they heard." This with a contemptuous glance at his adoring relatives.

"They would; I know them well," answered Raymond. "And now I am going to find your erring brother. Good-night."

Mrs. Egerton had gone to superintend the manufacture of beef-tea, so Sibyl came to the door with him.

"Good-bye," she said. Then she added slowly, "The Boy—Cecil told me

how far you carried him. I'm afraid I seemed ungrateful."

"Oh, it isn't a case for gratitude," said Raymond impatiently.

"We are all very much obliged to you," she murmured.

"Don't!" he said. "I know how it hurts you to have to thank me, and I don't deserve it; the most clownish yokel of the country side would have done the same. I'm not fit for you to know—you're quite right," he added irrelevantly. "Good-bye."

He held out his hand, but she did not take it. To his great surprise, however, she remained standing in the porch, looking at him. It was too dark for him to see her face, and he began to feel strangely excited, and also, it must be confessed, exceedingly embarrassed. Was she merely waiting for him to go? or did she intend to give him a chance of apologising?

He stood there silently for some time. The words came swarming to his tongue, but that unruly member refused to utter them. It was really very awkward; what a fool she must think him to be! At last he made a desperate effort, and began to speak, very slowly at first, then rapidly and incoherently.

“I don’t deserve your tiniest thought,” he said, “and I know I have forfeited all chance of your forgiveness. I insulted you vilely the other day, and there was a deeper insult still in my heart. I’m not pleading my cause now—don’t think that. When I saw you to-night at the gate and read your scorn of me in your eyes, I knew hope was dead. Oh!” he cried, as she made a slight movement, “I know what you feel now: bitter contempt, disgust for the man who can’t take his dismissal like a gentleman, but must needs put in a last appeal *ad misericordiam*; anger

at the chance which has brought me into your presence again. But at least don't be angry with chance: I should have come in any case. I returned from London to-day merely to see you once more, and to-morrow I go away from here for ever."

Having uttered this remarkably logical speech, he waited in silence for the answer. It was a long time in coming.

"I don't understand," she cried suddenly at last. "What did it mean? Why were you so angry because I was engaged to Mr. Dunton? You behaved exactly as if you had heard some story about me. I don't know of any one who could have told you it, unless—unless Mr. Dunton invented something. But that's impossible; he is not that kind of man."

"Sibyl!" he cried, "that was it! I did hear a story, and I—fool and

scoundrel that I was—thought that it concerned you, when really it concerned some one else to whom Dunton was engaged. Oh! it's unforgivable, I know, and yet, if you could hear all the facts . . . But you can't; that's impossible. I offer no excuse; I am absolutely guilty."

He bowed his head in a mournful ecstasy of self-abasement. Then he held out his hand again. She took it in both of hers.

"After all," she said, "unforgivable is a hard word."

When Raymond went away an hour later he was singing blatantly, and it was a very happy girl who helped the wounded one to eat a prodigious supper. The Boy evinced no inclination to sleep, and was mightily concerned about the fate of his bicycle.

"Do you think he'll send any one for

it to-night, Sibyl?" he asked at least twenty times.

Sibyl opined that the hour was overlate.

"I know all the plate 'll be ruined," said the Boy. "I suppose Theodore wouldn't like to go out again?"

Theodore, who had returned, was consulted, and evinced a strong disinclination for further exercise. "The bike will be all right," he said. "There's hardly any dew now, and I'll send Jenkins' boy for it first thing in the morning." And with this consolation the Boy had perforce to be content.

But when Sibyl went into the garden before breakfast next morning, lo! a marvel and a work of enchantment! The bicycle stood in the porch, with a new tyre on the straightened wheel, and the errant spokes each in his appointed place. All the damage, in fact, was repaired, though in somewhat amateur

fashion, and a card was attached to the handle bars whereon was inscribed :

To MR. BOY,

With MR. OBERON'S compliments.

And please don't leave your vulgar machinery in his wood again.

By Order.

PUCK,

Controller of Woods and Hillsides.

XIII

“YES, it’s a fine summer, m’m,” said the sexton, drawing himself up to his full height, “and grand for the old folk. There ain’t been a burying since old Jerry Morton last Michaelmas, and he’s a pauper, so I don’t reckon him. I don’t complain, m’m; I ain’t so strong in the back as I used to be, and seven foot by four means a deal o’ diggin’.”

“Yes, of course,” assented Mrs. Egerton rather hastily. “How well the roses look, Jarman! They certainly do you credit.”

She was sitting in Raymond’s garden, and the sexton had been engaged in weeding a flower-bed not far off. Raymond had taken Sibyl and the Boy to

inspect his grapes ; Mrs. Egerton had pleaded fatigue, and insisted on being left to converse with the sexton.

“ Ah ! you ought to have been here before Muster Curzon took to cutting ’em,” observed the sexton. “ Somethin’ like a show there was then ; but now he comes down every mornin’ and takes all the best blooms. What he does with ’em beats me : sends ’em to London, I s’pose.”

Mrs. Egerton tried to look as if she was ignorant that Sibyl’s room was “ roses, roses, all the way,” and remarked, “ Mr. Curzon loves flowers, at any rate. You ought to be glad that he notices how well you manage them.”

“ Oh ! I ain’t saying nothin’ against Muster Curzon,” observed the sexton, condescendingly. “ There ain’t no one as could be kinder when I have the rheumatics. But dear, dear ! What a pity it is, to be sure ! ”

"The rheumatism?" said Mrs. Eger-ton. "Yes, it must be a great trial. But I can assure you, Jarman, that it is not to be compared with neuralgia."

"I weren't speaking of rheumatiz," said the sexton solemnly; "and neuralgy, as you call it, don't touch me; my innards are sound enough, the Lord be praised. I meant Muster Curzon, m'm."

"Mr. Curzon!" cried the lady.

"Yes," answered the sexton, nodding mournfully. "Ain't you noticed, m'm?"

"Noticed what? What do you mean, Jarman?"

The sexton tapped his skull until it emitted a hollow echo.

"He keeps it down when he's in company, I reckon," he said, "but with me he's off his guard like. You may not believe it, m'm, but only a day or so back he wanted me to dance with him—in broad daylight, too."

"Wanted you to dance!" echoed Mrs.

Egerton. Her lips quivered. "How strange!" she said.

"Poor young fellow!" said the sexton, shaking his head.

Mrs. Egerton made an effort to regard him sternly. "I don't think I ought to discuss Mr. Curzon with you, Jarman," she said.

"Beg pardon, m'm," said the sexton stolidly, beginning to retreat towards a distant weed.

"I assure you that you are utterly mistaken, too," she added weakly.

"You'll find out some day, m'm. But he's harmless, very harmless," he replied. Then he turned his back on her.

Mrs. Egerton picked up a novel that lay on the ground by her side, and began to read it diligently. Apparently it was of an amusing nature.

XIV

"IT is an absurdly obvious truth," said Raymond to himself at frequent intervals during the next fortnight, "that everything in the world comes right in the end, and that Life is an exhilarating dramatic performance by a number of graceful and accomplished comedians. But the finest artist of them all is the Boy. If he had played his part in a slovenly manner, he would have limped home, I should not have carried him, Sibyl would not have admired me, and probably at this moment I should be perspiring in the tropics, or seeking oblivion beneath an avalanche. Oh! I will devise a brave reward for the Boy!"

Certainly the Boy's calamitous adven-

ture had been the means of ending all Raymond's tribulation, and that, apparently, for ever. Sibyl made no further allusion to the doubts which had so suddenly marred their love; she blamed herself for taking Raymond's eccentric nature too seriously, and made such excellent amends for her earlier coldness that the fortunate lover bade fair to become a monster of complacency and blatant happiness.

This delightful state of affairs continued for three weeks, and led, of course, to the utter neglect of the immortal work which Raymond was supposed to be writing. But at the end of this period an announcement came from Mrs. Egerton which blackened heaven and earth in a manner that suggested the *Dies Iræ*. It was absolutely necessary, she said, for Sibyl and herself to depart and pay a long promised visit to some relatives.

At first Raymond refused to believe

her. "Such a jest, Aunt Hilda," he said theatrically, "is beneath the notice of our enlightened souls. Never again will I be engaged: the very kindest ones of earth become bloodthirsty as inquisitors when they see a poor, harmless, pretty pair of lovers. Speak to her sadly yet sternly, Sibyl; my heart is out of joint."

But Mrs. Egerton was inexorable, and crushed him with weighty family reasons. "It will only last ten days," she concluded; "then we will come back here."

"Ten days!" he cried. "This is to pile the Pelion of eternity on the Ossa of a lifetime! You said a week, just now, you naughty, scheming woman."

"We must stay a week with Joseph," she said, "and we shall want two or three days in London for the base purposes of self-adornment."

"Preposterous!" he cried. "You are both modish beyond the dreams of Worth

already. I forbid those three days in London. Theodore, I appeal to you: if you had the courage of your cloth you also would veto this love of worldly pomp. It is for Joseph's eye, I suppose: may Joseph go down quick into the pit, whoever he is. Pardon a Biblical allusion, Theodore; my soul is distraught within me. To separate two innocents thus!"

But the end of it was that they went, having given a solemn promise to return in exactly ten days. A solemn procession accompanied them to the station; Raymond, indeed, attempted to enter the train when it began to move, but the strong arm of the Church held him back, much to the delight of the station-master and the Boy. The latter gentleman, at his own urgent request, had been left behind that he might devote his time to the study of Abbot and Mansfield's Greek grammar, and had sapiently destroyed the one copy of that

interesting work which existed in the Rectory.

* * * * *

Exactly twenty-four hours after this dreadful separation, Sibyl was sitting alone in her aunt's drawing-room at Hans Place when the door opened and a servant entered.

"A caller: what a nuisance!" thought Sibyl, putting down her book and trying to appear wide awake.

"Mr. Dunton," announced the servant, and ushered in a tall, bronzed and bearded man with keen, restless eyes.

Sibyl rose quickly. "You, of all people, in London now!" she said. "I thought you always fled to the desert as soon as the season began, and remained there for the rest of the year?"

"Well, I did flee," said Arthur Dunton, taking her hand, "but I had to come back to arrange about an exhibition of my dreadful works. It is good luck—

finding you here; but I won't pretend that chance brought me to call. I saw you this morning in Regent Street. From your rapt, inspired expression I surmised that you were about to buy a hat."

"Quite right!" answered Sibyl, laughing; "though really I believe that you guessed the truth because Aunt Hilda looked so bored. You remember how she used to detest shopping?"

He smiled. "Are you staying in Town for long?" he asked.

"We go North to-morrow, milliners permitting, for a week," she replied. "Then we go back again to the abode of our venerable brother, the Reverend the Rector of Swansfield."

"Oh! has Theodore got a living?" asked Dunton.

"The lawn sleeves will ere long rustle on his wrists," she said, "like the noise of angels' wings."

"Swansfield, did you say?" he inquired. "Why do I seem to know the name?"

"That is his parish," said Sibyl. "I forgot that when you went away he was still an unimportant curate."

"Swansfield—Swansfield," he murmured, stroking his short beard. Then he cried suddenly, "I know! I've got it!"

"A sunstroke?" asked Sibyl placidly.

"Probably," he replied. "Did I shout? I beg your pardon. I remember where I heard the name. Oho!" he chuckled; "this explains a lot!"

"It does indeed," said Sibyl.

"You may not believe it," he went on, with a fine air of mystery, "but I found a letter with the Swansfield postmark awaiting me when I returned the other day."

"It is very wrong of Aunt Hilda to write to young men," said Sibyl severely.

"It was posted a month ago," continued Dunton. "No; it wasn't from Mrs. Egerton. No such luck. I wonder if by any chance you have heard of a fellow called Curzon? He has taken a cottage somewhere down there."

"I seem to know the name," she replied. "Have you seen your brother?"

"No; he went out of Town before I returned," he said. "But why do you ask that? What on earth has my brother to do with Curzon?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing," she answered. "Is this Mr. Curzon a friend of yours?"

"Yes; I've known him for a long time. If you meet him, be kind: he is a capital fellow, quite mad, and distinctly brainy."

"I think I have met him," said Sibyl.

"Have you?" he cried. "Happy, happy Raymond!"

Sibyl frowned slightly. "Don't trouble to be obviously stupid," she said.

"Oh, I wasn't trying to pay a silly compliment," he protested. "I really meant what I said."

"You shouldn't do that," said Sibyl gravely.

"It's a fact, I assure you. In meeting you Curzon has realised the ecstatic ideal of his life."

"How stupid you are to-day!" she said. "I know he never saw me before we met at Swansfield. How could I be an ecstatic ideal?" She began to smile.

"That is where you are wrong," he answered. "He has seen you before."

"Indeed! and where?"

"In my studio," said Dunton triumphantly.

"I'm certain that we never met there, or anywhere else."

"He saw you in my studio," persisted Dunton. "Oh! it's a triumph for me! Talk about Art holding up the mirror to Nature! It shall be carved on my tomb

that Raymond Curzon, scribe, of the county of London, roamed the wide world to find the counterpart of one of my statues, and found it in the pleasant hamlet of Swansfield."

"Ridiculous!" she said. "My name was in the catalogue when your statue was exhibited. It was quite unnecessary for him to roam the wide world. Not that I believe your silly story: he had only to go to you to learn all about me."

"He couldn't."

"And why?"

"Because he never saw my portrait of you at all. Strange, pathetic as it may seem, it is a fact that until a short time ago there was one man in London who knew neither my work nor me; and his name was Curzon."

"I don't understand you," she said.

"Listen. When I went away, some months ago, I left the key of my studio with Curzon, because I had, as usual,

quarrelled with my brother. Well, one day Curzon went in to see that all was right, and being of an appreciative nature, removed the sheets that shrouded my various immortal works. For one of them the sculptor's art had devised a head so wonderful that the susceptible critic forgot the Melian Venus herself in his contemplation of it. He retired, palpitating,—miserably enamoured of a beauty which his fine æsthetic instinct pronounced such as to belong to no mere model,—and resolved to discover the earthly counterpart——”

“But what has all this to do with me?” interrupted Sibyl calmly. Her face, however, expressed a sudden intense interest.

“I will tell you,” he answered. “The statue which fluttered his æsthetic heart was originally the portrait of—of a model. This model was quite good enough for the body, but for certain absurd reasons I

disapproved of her face, and just before I went away I began to alter its features. And now comes the extraordinary part of the story. More than four years had passed since you sat for me,—you remember?—yet, try as I would, I couldn't keep the face from growing like you. I suppose it was mere chance. Of course I didn't mean to leave it like you, but I had to go away suddenly, and so it remained in the studio, and Curzon had the key. Isn't it a wonderful romance? ”

“ Yes,” Sibyl answered thoughtfully; “ but I don't see why you didn't mean to leave it like me.”

“ Well, it wouldn't have quite done, you know,” he said slowly. “ Of course you wouldn't have minded: you understand what art is; but your people might have objected. The likeness was quite recognisable.”

“ It wouldn't have mattered,” she said.

“ I shouldn't have allowed it to remain

unaltered," he went on. "Besides, I have a sentimental objection: the girl who sat for the rest of it wasn't a nice girl at all."

"Oh!" said Sibyl.

"But I'm not going to alter the rest of it on that account," continued Dunton. "The limbs are the best bit of modelling I have done yet. If there weren't such things as waxworks in the world, I believe I would have them tinted to actual flesh-colour."

Sibyl sat straight up in her chair, and looked at him with horror-stricken eyes.

"Oh!" she cried "Oh! how horrible!" A red flush crept across her face; she glared at him like a splendid, insulted goddess.

"I say, there's nothing wrong, is there? I haven't said anything——?" stammered Dunton, growing very uncomfortable.

"How could you? how dare you?" she

said, clenching her hands. Then she rose suddenly and swept out of the room.

Dunton remained staring in amazement at the door for some moments, then he walked towards a mirror which was above the mantelpiece.

“Your little story has scarcely met with the appreciation that it deserves, my boy,” he remarked to his reflexion. “But what on earth has happened to her? She usen’t to be that sort. However, it is time for me to go, I suppose, or perhaps I shall be ejected by the butler. Really, women are the most extraordinary animals! I shall turn hermit, and inhabit a burrow, for they beat me altogether. Villon was right,—*‘bien est heureux qui riens n’y a!’* But Sibyl, of all people in the world!”

And the unhappy student of sex took up his hat and crawled ingloriously forth into the sunshine.

XV

“You are standing still,” said Raymond to the sun. “You are like the Law, merely stationary. I comprehend all the sensations of Joshua’s unfortunate enemies. Ah! I wonder if they longed for dinner-time with half the fervour that I feel!”

He prowled restlessly to and fro in the garden, dropped into a chair and picked up a novel, read a few lines, and then flung it into a flower-bed. It broke in half, and some of the pages fluttered across the lawn. He contemplated them with weary eyes.

“Thus do those in love treat their old friends,” he said. “I little thought that the hour would come when even Madame

Chrysanthème would be powerless to smile away a tedious afternoon. Oh ! I must read something, or I shall rave like any Bethlehemite." He fingered the books which lay upon the table. "Perhaps the *Purgatorio* will do. At any rate, the people of its pages are experiencing the so-called pleasures of anticipation. Pleasures ! How arbitrary are stock phrases ! Everyone knows that the more delightful the thing anticipated seems, the greater is the pain of tediously awaiting it."

He began to walk aimlessly towards the cottage. Eight days had passed since Sibyl's departure ; only forty-eight hours separated him from the sight of her, but if those hours died no faster than the last twelve, Raymond was mournfully confident that a grey-haired caricature of himself would meet her at the station.

"Oh that I could find oblivion in action !" he cried. "Oh that something,

even an unpleasant something, might happen ! ”

Destiny, surveying him from the mouth of her secret cave, tittered maliciously, and accelerated the pace of a pedestrian who was approaching the village.

“ I will go for a walk,” said Raymond at last ; “ and I will make the Boy come with me. His criticisms of life are delightful : to him belongs all the fine, fresh dogmatism of inexperience. We will talk about Sibyl, and condemn the mathematics. We will discuss the relative value of sweetstuffs. We will grow eloquent on idleness, and the rigid rule of the seminary shall lure our lips to laughter and our hearts to hate. I will go and find him now.”

But at this moment there was a loud ring at the bell.

“ Who is that ? ” he murmured, retiring into the garden. “ It can’t be the Boy. My bell was ever innocent of his fingers.

It must be a county family, or the grocer, or some other local celebrity. I'll sneak out by the field."

But as he reached the garden gate his housekeeper came out of the cottage. Obviously she was looking for him. He turned, and went towards her.

"A gentleman to see you, sir," she said.

"The grocer, no doubt," thought Raymond: "he is probably the squire of the parish also. Who is it?" he asked.

"A stranger, I think, sir," answered the housekeeper. "He wouldn't give his name; he said he wanted to surprise you, sir."

"Very thoughtful and nice of him," said Raymond, and followed her into the house.

The visitor was contemplating a water-colour above the mantelpiece as Raymond entered the room. He turned quickly when he heard the door open.

"Hullo, Raymond!" he said, grinning.

Raymond stared at him as if he was a ghost. "Well, Dunton," he said at length. "It's you, is it?"

"Yes, it's I," answered Dunton, holding out his hand. "How are you?"

"Oh, I'm all right!" said Raymond. "Sit down, won't you? I'm all right. That is, I'm convalescent."

"I never heard that you had been ill," said Dunton, in a tone of deep sympathy.

"That is why I'm here," explained Raymond. "I have been ordered here for perfect rest and quiet—solitude and all that, you know. But I'm glad you looked in." He dropped wearily into a chair.

Dunton appeared to be slightly embarrassed by this affectionate greeting. "I'm sorry," he said.

"You're staying somewhere near here, I suppose?" asked Raymond. There was a trace of anxiety in his manner.

"Well, no," Dunton answered. "The fact is, Raymond, I wondered if you could put me up for a night or two. I have a lot of things to tell you, and I want to do some sketching. Rather cheek of me to ask, though."

"Not at all," said Raymond. "I shall be delighted to put you up for one night, or even for two. But you must promise to go early in the day after to-morrow. Don't think me rude: my doctor has made me swear not to talk to people for more than forty-eight hours—I mean not to excite myself with conversation, you know."

"Oh, all right," said Dunton, looking extremely surprised. "I won't bother you for more than one night. I'll find some rooms in the village to-morrow. Do you know of any?"

Raymond appeared to think deeply. "No," he said, after a few moments, "I don't. In fact, I'm absolutely cer-

tain that there are none. And I think it is my duty to warn you that there is typhoid, or something, all over the village. Nature is usually riddled with zymotic diseases."

"Oh, I'm proof against anything of that kind," said Dunton: "my wanderings have at least done that for me."

"Ah! but now that I come to think of it," said Raymond, "I remember that a new and excessively virulent type of smallpox rages. Take my advice, old fellow, and don't stay. It's never worth while running risks of this kind. For myself, I go to-morrow."

"Indeed?" said Dunton, and then he began to smile.

"What the devil are you grinning at?" asked Raymond irritably. "I don't think it is particularly good form to come all the way from London for the purpose of laughing at an invalid."

"An invalid?" said Dunton. "Good

heavens!" And he began to laugh aloud.

"Yes, an invalid," reiterated Raymond: "I'm not at all certain that I haven't got some disease. You wouldn't laugh so vulgarly if you caught it from me."

"My dear fellow," said Dunton, "it's no use. You are enjoying health that your lack of hospitality justifies me in calling rude. But it's evident that you don't want me here. Why? I am not conceited enough to believe that you have any personal objection to my presence."

"Dunton," said Raymond, "you are an intelligent man. You are capable of appreciating a tactful hint. And now, as a reward for your perspicuity, I will tell you why you have got to go. In exactly forty-eight hours some one will come here in whom I am greatly interested, and it is extremely important that she shouldn't see you."

"A very lucid explanation," said

Dunton. "I won't ask why she shouldn't see me. I know my own accursed beauty too well, alas!"

"I don't mind telling you in strict confidence," said Raymond, "that I am not nearly so afraid of your fatal beauty as of your facile tongue."

"Well, old fellow," said Dunton, "you can calm your fearful breast with the knowledge that I shall depart to-morrow. I can assure you that nothing in the world would induce me to meet Miss Dalrymple face to face."

"How do you know that I am talking about Miss Dalrymple?" asked Raymond. Then he cried, "Oh! Charles has told you all about her, has he? And what, sir, is to hinder me from murdering you? What arguments have you to urge against being flayed alive? Fortunately, your abominable behaviour hasn't ruined me, though only a wonderful accident—a bicycle accident—

prevented it from doing so. Seriously, do you think it was decent to put her head on that figure of yours? You must alter it at once."

"I haven't seen Charles; he has told me nothing. Why should I alter the face?"

"Because Miss Dalrymple and I are engaged to be married," said Raymond superbly.

"No! Are you really?" cried his friend, looking enormously startled. "I congratulate you—I congratulate you very heartily. That certainly throws a light on things in general. But why suggest flaying alive? After all, I brought you together; if I hadn't accidentally made the face like Miss Dalrymple, it is very probable that you would never have fallen in love with her at all. By the way, you might suggest that point of view to her. She ought to be grateful to me also."

"My dear Dunton," said Raymond,

"I shall do nothing of the kind. Miss Dalrymple shall never hear another word about that wretched statue as long as she lives. I thought at first that I would confess the whole story to her after we were married, but I have concluded finally not to do so. It would even then be too risky. But I'm not ungrateful, Dunton, and to prove it I invite you to stay here. Only, you must promise not to mention the statue."

"Don't alarm yourself," said Dunton, looking rather sheepish. "I'm off to-morrow. I didn't know she was coming back so soon."

"I understand," said Raymond: "you think that it might be awkward for her to meet you. I know all about that ancient affair. Well, you may be right. It would certainly be painful for you, I should think."

Dunton was silent for some time; then he asked suddenly, "You are quite

certain that she knows nothing about the statue ? ”

“ Yes,” answered Raymond. “ She knows the outline of the story, of course, only she thought I fell in love with the portrait you did of her. That Florentine chair of yours nearly caused awful complications, though—but I’ll explain all about that at some other time. The one thing that you have got to remember is that this must be kept secret. Nobody knows except you : Charles is all right, if he has any suspicions you can soon lull them to rest.”

“ Raymond,” said Dunton gravely, “ you are wrong. Some one else does know the secret.”

“ What ! ” cried Raymond. “ Who ? In the name of Heaven, Dunton, who ? ”

“ Miss Sibyl Dalrymple,” said Dunton slowly.

“ Don’t be a fool,” said Raymond, staring at him.

"It's true," said Dunton miserably. "I saw her only a week ago, and——"

"Sibyl!" cried Raymond. "Oh! it's all over, then." He walked across the room, then turned savagely on Dunton. "You brute!" he said, "you low-minded, petty scoundrel! You showed her the statue when she was in Town! I see it all! What are you waiting for? Go!"

Dunton sat quite still, the incarnation of patient contrition. "Curse away," he said; "I deserve it. I blurted the whole thing out; I gave it all away, thinking it was rather a good joke. Oh! I'm a fool! but if I'd known that you had made a mystery of it—if I could have guessed from her manner that she was engaged to you—nothing would have induced me to mention it. But she pretended that she only knew you very slightly."

"So she did," said Raymond; "but it doesn't matter. She knows me now

as a liar and a hypocrite. Oh ! curse you, Dunton ! I'm sorry, but that's how I feel." He went to the window and stood looking out, with his back turned on the unhappy jester.

"How did she take it ?" he asked after awhile.

"Eh ?" said Dunton. Remorse had dulled his senses.

"What did she say ?"

"She said 'Oh !'" Dunton answered, "but in a peculiar tone. And then she walked straight out of the room, and left me to crawl away by myself. I'm glad she did, too ; I thought she was going to box my ears."

"You ought to have been kicked out by the footmen," said Raymond, glaring steadily out of the window.

An embarrassing silence followed this genial observation. At last Dunton rose.

"Suppose I'd better be going," he said feebly. "I say, Raymond, you don't

know how sorry I am about this. I know she's awful when her temper is up. Can't I do anything?"

"No," said Raymond, suddenly wheeling round and holding out his hand. "Yes, you can. You may as well announce that our engagement is broken off."

"Oh! it won't be as bad as that, you know!" said Dunton feebly, and then he walked away to the station. Pitiful exits seemed to be his lot in life.

"I *am* a fool!" he murmured at frequent intervals.

But when he had walked for half a mile he suddenly sat down by the roadside and began to laugh.

"It is all wonderful," he said, "but the most wonderful part of the whole affair is that it is absolutely and entirely his fault; and yet he managed to make me believe that it was all mine. I wonder, though, if he will be able to repeat the process with Sibyl?"

XVI

"I SUPPOSE you haven't got a ready-made grave, have you?" asked Raymond.

The sexton did not evince any symptoms of surprise. "No, sir," he answered: "did you happen to be wanting one?"

"It doesn't matter," said Raymond. "I don't feel at all concerned as to what may happen to me afterwards. I shall manage quite well without it. Does hemlock grow in churchyards?"

"Not in mine," said the sexton. "Some fellers, though, haven't no proper pride: my old father never put the scythe to the grass more'n twice a twelvemonth. But as long as I'm above ground you won't find no weeds. What d'ye want hemlock for? Hemlock's poison."

“Just so,” said Raymond, “and poison of a very comfortable kind. I know my *Phædo*. I suppose that you have never been sentenced to death?”

“Not as I remember,” answered the sexton.

“Nor have I,” said Raymond; “but I shall be, very soon. And then I shall smile calmly, and smoke a great deal, and display an inordinate fondness for fine raiment. In fact, when once the sentence has been pronounced, I shall have rather a good time. It is the anticipation of it that hurts—the tiny, dying spark of hope in one’s heart keeps all one’s nerves on edge, and repels the merciful apathy of despair. I am like the man in the Greek tragedy who analyses his emotions for the benefit of the chorus whilst the messenger approaches to announce his fate. You are the chorus; the messenger’s part will be played, of course,

by the postman. He is due very soon, isn't he?"

"He came half an hour ago," said the sexton, regarding him with deep pity. "I saw him going to the Rectory. There wasn't no letter for you to-day, I reckon."

"The trial will last for another day," said Raymond. "Possibly my fate will be announced by the protagonist of the play herself. Does hemlock grow in the Rectory garden? Do you think the Rector will have some stewed for lunch at my request?"

He walked slowly away. The sexton stared at him and shook his head lugubriously.

Raymond found Theodore engaged in cleaning his pipes on the lawn. The Boy was lying on the grass near him, watching the process with intense interest; he sprang up, however, when

he saw Raymond, and ran towards him.

“I say!” he shouted excitedly, “they aren’t coming back to-morrow! They’re going to stay on at old Uncle Joseph’s! I never heard such rot in my life; they were awfully sick at having to go. But girls always do change their minds, don’t they?”

“I bow before your experience, Boy,” said Raymond, sitting down on the grass. “’Morning, Theodore.”

The blow had fallen. The anguish of expectancy was ended, and immediately he realised that he would give his soul for another hour of that torturing hope. He had been wrong: better the gnawing pain of uncertainty than the dullness of confirmed despair. He arrived at this conclusion whilst Theodore was speaking.

“Absurd of them!” said the latter; “Joseph is a pompous rascal with an early Victorian house full of mahogany

and horsehair and solid ugliness. I can't understand it. Has Sibyl written to you to-day, Raymond? She promised to return to-morrow, I know."

"No; she hasn't written," replied Raymond.

"I expect it's a joke," said the Boy, lying on his back and waving his feet towards the sky. "They'll turn up to-morrow all right, you bet your buttons."

"Cecil! How often shall I have to speak to you about using slang?" said Theodore wrathfully. "It's a beastly trick. Well, if they do come to-morrow they will have to drive over in the station-master's cart, which is all spikes and no springs. That will be a very proper chastisement."

"Very," assented Raymond, with a poor attempt at a laugh. "But, personally, I don't think they will come."

"Oh yes, they will," said the Boy. "Sibyl is far too keen on you to stay

with Uncle Joseph." For this speech the Boy expected to be beaten, but he was disappointed. Raymond merely stared at the sky. Theodore blew down a wheezy pipe until his cheeks were monstrous and purple. The Boy proceeded to mount the heights of impertinence.

"I expect she has met some jolly man at Joseph's," he remarked. "You look just like one of those funny spouts on the church, The."

"He is a pillar of the Church, not a gargoyle," said Raymond, with a wan smile.

Theodore grunted savagely, and threw down the asthmatic pipe.

"When did you last hear from Sibyl, Raymond?" he asked.

"On the day after she went away," answered Raymond. "She wrote as soon as she reached London."

Theodore stared at him. "Do you

mean to say that she hasn't written since?" he cried. "What an extraordinary girl she is!" Then something in Raymond's face silenced his exclamations abruptly. After a moment he turned to the Boy.

"Boy," he said, "Raymond and I have something to discuss which wouldn't amuse you. Go and tell them to hurry up with lunch."

"All right," replied the Boy. He seemed to realise that his brother was serious, and went off at once. When he had disappeared Theodore turned to Raymond.

"You're not joking?" he asked.

"Do I look like a humourist?" said Raymond. And unless humourists are, as some aver, the saddest-looking of mortals, he certainly did not.

"Now look here," said Theodore, affecting to be vastly busy amongst his pipes, "you know I'm not the sort of

fellow to pry into things which don't concern me, but of course I'm very anxious that Sibyl should be happy. I know you had some disagreement before, though she said nothing to me about it, but I thought that you made it up on the night when the Boy broke himself to small pieces. Am I wrong ? ”

“ No,” Raymond answered. “ We made it up then. That is, she forgave me. The fault was entirely mine.”

“ Then what in the world has happened ? ” cried Theodore. “ Everything was all right when we saw them off at the station, wasn't it ? Or were you pretending to be friendly because Aunt Hilda and I were there ? ”

“ Everything was all right then,” said Raymond wearily. “ The cause of her not writing to me has arisen since. She met a fellow who knew me, and he said—oh ! he said a lot of indiscreet things.”

"About your past life?" asked Theodore, gazing intently at a gigantic briar.

"Yes, but not in the sense you mean," Raymond answered. "Oh! I may as well tell you the whole story. You would hear it soon in any case, and I may as well give you an opportunity of throwing me out of the garden. I deserve it, I know."

And then he gave a brief outlined account of the curious chain of circumstance which had duped him. Theodore sat very still, looking at the pipe in his hand, but now and then a slight smile stole to his lips. Inside the house the Boy contemplated a cooling lunch with considerable anxiety.

"That is all," said Raymond at last. "Now you can begin to castigate. I assure you that I shall kiss the rod. Say what you think of me."

"Do you really want to know?" asked Theodore.

"Yes," answered Raymond. "You may swear if you like. I won't report you to your churchwardens."

"Well, I'll tell you," said Theodore, and suddenly he began to smile. "I think that you are the most preposterous and romantic idiot on earth. Why, man! what is there to be ashamed of? You certainly jumped to a foolish conclusion, but with all that apparent evidence, you never so much as half believed it. But," he added, becoming grave again, "it's unfortunate, to put it mildly, that the lady in question is my esteemed sister. My esteemed sister is a darling, of course, but she is just a little unreasonable, and your intense remorse on that former occasion will tend to make her regard the whole affair far too seriously. If you had told her the whole story then, with a laugh, she would perhaps have been angry for a day or two, but she would have recovered very soon: for a woman,

she possesses a fair sense of humour. But now she will estimate matters from your ridiculous standpoint, and will be hurt, too, at finding that you were still concealing the truth when she thought you were confessing it frankly. I don't think she will allow you to see her for some time."

"Of coursenot," cried Raymond. "But, Theodore—you don't think I've a chance, do you? She will hate me for ever!"

"That's nonsense, my dear fellow," answered Theodore. "Don't worry yourself: she'll come round all right. Only a grievance is a great boon to a woman, you know, and she will probably cling to this one until it begins to bore her. You can do nothing but wait."

"And that is just what I can't do," said Raymond. "Oh! you don't understand this kind of thing at all. Do you think that I can sit still and smile whilst she is breaking her heart?"

Theodore laughed in a scarcely sympathetic manner, but said nothing.

"I must see her," Raymond went on, "even if it is fatal. After all, matters are as bad as they could be. Hopeless love is the worst thing in the world."

"There's nothing hopeless in the case," said Theodore. "But if you'll take my advice you won't attempt to see her yet. Time will play the game far better than you, in your present excited state, could hope to do. Go away for awhile, and keep on telling yourself all the time that you are a mightily injured person. If you once begin to imagine that your pride is wounded, you will forget all about your broken heart."

"You're right! you're right!" cried Raymond, springing up. "I'll go to-morrow. I'll stay away a month—two months—three; and then, if there are no signs of forgiveness, I shall know that all is really over. But you might send

me a line, Theodore, if you think I have a chance. Those three months won't be so exquisite as to stand in no need of abridgment."

"Oh, I'll write to you, of course!" said Theodore. "But why go so soon?"

"Because I can't stay here," answered Raymond irritably.

"Ah, well," said Theodore, with undiminished good-humour, "you know best, of course. And if you really mean to go, I'll write and tell Sibyl."

"Be sure to let her know that I have gone for a long time," said Raymond bitterly.

Theodore surveyed him with an approving eye. "That's right," he said: "feel as injured as you can. There's nothing like it. And now let us go and have some lunch, if the Boy has spared it. Whatever you do," he added, as they entered the Rectory, "don't forget that you have a really magnifi-

cent grievance. She'll come round all right."

"Theodore," said Raymond, "you're the best parson I ever met. And that, though of course you won't think so, is a very decent compliment."

"Oh! parsons are all right," said the Reverend Theodore, "as long as they don't wear moustaches or blue ribbons. But I confess that I prefer laymen. I always had a taste for low company."

And then they sat down to lunch, arriving, apparently, only just in time to spare the Boy the last pangs of starvation.

XVII

“ I DIDN’T expect that you would ever speak to me again,” said Dunton.

“ I have been thinking things over,” explained Raymond, “ and I have realised that it wasn’t altogether your fault.”

“ Thanks,” said Dunton, leaning back in his chair and puffing a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling ; “ thanks very much, Raymond. The joke of the thing was, you know, that I was trying to do you a good turn : I thought I should make her take an interest in you. But I don’t think nature designed me for a match-maker. I only burn my fingers. Is that a pun ? In future, at any rate, when I begin to feel altruistic, I shall buy a dynamite cartridge and play with it. Other people’s affairs are too dangerous a game for me.”

“ True,” assented Raymond. “ Have a whisky-and-soda ? ”

“ Thank you,” said Dunton, taking it.

A silence followed. Raymond moved about the room throwing books and clothes somewhere in the direction of a portmanteau that lay open on the floor ; Dunton sipped his whisky-and-soda meditatively.

“ I say, Raymond ? ” he said at last.

“ Yes,” replied Raymond, in a muffled voice. He was trying to rescue a book which had fallen beyond his reach into the dark abyss behind his shelves.

“ I suppose it’s a devilish bad business, old fellow ? ” said Dunton.

Raymond struggled with the truant volume for a moment, then drew it carefully up the wall.

“ Your supposition is correct for once,” he replied, rubbing his dusty hands together and walking towards the port-

manteau. "I'll give you a shilling if you will pack for me."

"No chance, eh?" went on Dunton. "At least, however, we are companions in despair."

"What?" said Raymond, surveying his placid face with sudden surprise. "Oh, of course! I forgot."

He laughed softly and went into his bedroom to wash his hands. Dunton continued to talk to him through the open door.

"You haven't heard from her, have you?" he asked.

"No."

"You think it is improbable that she will write?"

"Yes."

"Quite certain?"

"Yes, oh yes! Do talk about something else, Dunton."

"Well, it won't be my fault if she doesn't."

Silence in the bedroom.

"In fact, I am of the opinion that she will."

Silence, except for a sound of splashing water.

"I did my best for you, old fellow."

"Oh, I hope not!" said Raymond vaguely, as he washed. Presently he came back to the sitting-room with a towel in his hands. "Do shut up, Dunton!" he pleaded.

"You have every right to pitch into me, I know," said Dunton: "I was a fool. But I think you'll find I have made some amends for my foolishness."

Raymond stared at him blankly.

"It was a hard struggle, though," continued Dunton. "These things aren't as easy as ordinary lying."

Raymond took the towel into the bedroom, reappeared, shut the door, and then sat down opposite the speaker.

"Have you been meddling again, Dunton?" he asked sternly.

"Oh! call it that if you like," answered Dunton. "That's the kind of thanks always received by the philanthropist." He gulped his whisky-and-soda savagely. "I won't tell you what I've done," he added, "but some day, when you would give the whole world to thank me, I shall not be there. Life is a bitter farce."

"Dunton," said Raymond, "what have you been doing?"

"I shall not tell you," said Dunton. "I am not going to boast. But I may inform you that you are fortunate in possessing a friend of noble character."

"Indeed?" said Raymond.

"Yes, indeed!" retorted Dunton. "I've a jolly good mind to—— No, I won't, though—not now, at all events. You are scarcely in a condition to appreciate

sublime altruism. Perhaps, many years hence, I may be induced to explain how I secured your happiness for you, but at present—no. Indeed, it is probable that you would not believe me; your narrow soul would not be able to realise the vastness of my self-abnegation. I shall observe a noble silence.”

“Observe whatever you like,” said Raymond wearily, beginning to thrust the books into the portmanteau; “but I hope you haven’t been making a fool of yourself again.”

“Oh, ingratitude!” cried Dunton, “how very keen thou art! Making a fool of myself! My good Raymond, I have done more than that.”

“Nonsense!” remarked Raymond.

“But yes,” continued Dunton: “I have written myself down a liar in damning black and white; I have sullied my own fair fame; I have asserted that hard fact was foolish fiction.”

"Very improper," said Raymond, yawning.

"By Jove! I'll tell you everything!" cried the exasperated Dunton. "Two days ago I wrote to Miss Dalrymple, informing her that the questionable part of your story was a lie invented by me, the perjured."

"What story?" asked Raymond, staring at him.

"The foolery about you and the statue, and all that. I solemnly assured her that I invented it as a joke against you. Of course she will never speak to me again; but I shall be adequately rewarded by the knowledge of your happiness. You may embrace me if you desire to do so."

Instead of responding to this alluring invitation, Raymond began to laugh immoderately.

"Your life is one long contribution to the world's gaiety," he said. "You may reward yourself with the thought

that you will cause Miss Dalrymple several minutes of acute amusement."

"Do you mean to say that she won't believe me?" asked Dunton, with vast disgust.

"Of course not," said Raymond. "She knows the whole story now. I gave her its outline, and you obligingly added the details."

Dunton sighed. "I knew it," he said. "I knew in my heart of hearts that something would happen to ruin my devotion. All through my life I have attempted to play the benevolent hero, and Fate has insisted on changing this noble part to that of the low comedian. I was once (once is an adverb denoting time past) engaged to a delightful girl; and, thinking that she loved me no longer, I made her a magnificent speech alluding to my broken heart, and giving her back her freedom. She was the daughter of a Devonshire farmer—a

simple creature of the woods and fields ; but her simplicity did not hinder her from bringing an action for breach of promise. My letters, my splendid poetical letters, were read aloud by a grinning barrister, and reduced the Court to guffaws and my banking account to an absurdity. I rescued a would-be suicide from his watery tomb, and he hit me with such force during the process that my eyes were darkened for weeks, and I had to stay in bed. And now I have again been thwarted. I'll turn anarchist, or go into the Church. Doesn't the Church forbid works of supererogation ? I should be safe there."

"The moral beauty of your intention remains," said Raymond.

"True," replied Dunton mournfully ; "but I have observed that moral beauties and moral triumphs are too often the colourless masks behind which we hide our tears of disappointment and defeat. Well, well ! I must await another op-

portunity of heroism. When are you going away, Raymond ? ”

“ To-morrow morning,” Raymond answered. “ I don’t propose to spend more than twenty-four hours in this Inferno. Excuse me for a moment: I heard the postman knock whilst you were talking.”

He went out, and soon returned with half a dozen letters. He looked at the envelopes, and flung all except one on the floor.

“ This is from your friend Miss Dalrymple’s brother,” he said, opening the letter which he had not thrown down.

“ Any luck ? ” asked Dunton.

Raymond read the few lines scrawled by Theodore, his brow knitted. Then he flung the letter away.

Dunton repeated the question.

“ Your damned diplomacy did no good,” said Raymond curtly. Then he began to pack his portmanteau with great care.

Early next morning he went abroad.

XVIII

SOME months later, on a bright October day, a sunburnt young man might have been observed walking down one of the streets of Westminster. He went slowly, looking about him in the manner of one unfamiliar with great cities, watching the faces of the passers-by, the horses, and the shop-windows with an air of humorous enjoyment. Yet, had you followed him, you would have found that he possessed a knowledge of short cuts through by-streets which was scarcely consistent with his apparently rustic interest in the sights of the town; and he crossed the road with the delicate tread of one who has experienced the adhesive virtues of London mud.

He strolled past the Abbey in the direction of Dean's Yard, stopping for a few moments to gaze from porch to pinnacle of the great church with eyes full of quiet appreciation. Then he remarked aloud, to no one in particular :

“After all, Gothic's the only wear. It hits my susceptible heart harder than all the gilded pagodas of the East. The Byzantine is only a gorgeous barbarism. Which, I suppose, is the kind of fatuous platitude always uttered by the returned traveller. I think I'll go and look at the tombs : after a surfeit of pagodas and saints they will be intensely soothing. And they almost persuade one to believe history.”

“He's talking to himself, as usual,” said a voice behind him. “Raymond !”

The sunburnt young man turned round quickly, and perceived a yellow-haired person in a very white collar and an Eton suit.

“Boy!” he cried. “Is it you, or is it your greatly elongated ghost? And in a hat brilliant beyond the beams of Aurora! I am glad to see you. What are you doing here?”

“I’m at Westminster now—the school, you know,” explained the Boy, shaking his hand fervently, “What luck to meet you! How long have you been back?”

“I only reached England on Thursday,” said Raymond. “Are you doing anything now? No? That’s excellent. Come round to my rooms: they are quite near here,—this side of St. James’s Park.” And he dragged the Boy into a hansom.

“I’ll come,” said the Boy, “but I mustn’t stay. I promised to meet Sibyl at five. Saturday is the only day when I am free,” he added, with a delightful assumption of the manner of a harassed man of business. “I say, you *are* brown!”

“I know,” said Raymond apologetically; “it’s disgraceful, but I can’t help it. It’s the custom of the countries whose guest I have been, and it would have been impolite not to follow the fashion. How is my beloved Theodore?”

“Oh, Theodore is all right, I believe,” replied the Boy. “He spends his time oiling his cricket bat and thinking how he might have played the balls that bowled him last summer. His average was a decimal. He’s a disgrace to the family.”

“Is Mrs. Egerton quite well?” asked Raymond.

“Aunt Hilda’s all right too,” said the Boy, “only she is very anxious about my future. I wish I was as old as you, then I shouldn’t have one.”

“Graceful compliment,” said Raymond. “Here we are. Come in. I’m on the fourth floor, amongst the chimney-pots and stars.”

They went up in the lift to Raymond's flat, which was furnished in strict accordance with the tenets of hedonism. The library, which was also the drawing-room and the study, was panelled in dark wood, and lined with many books, and possessed a subtle atmosphere of indolence somewhat at variance with the large paper-littered desk near the window. It was quite a delightful room, and full of the casual collection of ten years' travel, —dull-green bronzes, ivory-white statues, terra-cotta figurines from Tanagra, and Chinese jars and Japanese lacquer, Majolica and Limoges ware, rugs from Persia and tiles from Holland, some fine engravings, some extraordinarily comfortable armchairs, and books—books everywhere, from the French novel in its frayed gamboge cover to the gilded splendour of the work of Clovis Eve. The pale autumn sunlight filtered through the small leaded panes of

the windows, and the tumult of London sounded like the faint roaring of a distant sea.

“What a jolly room!” said the Boy, curling himself like a cat in the largest chair he could find; “I wish they had chairs like this at school. Everything is so hard there; your clothes get shiny all over in no time. Where have you been, Raymond? It’s simply ages since I saw you.”

“I have been in many places,” answered Raymond, “and have eaten a great deal of curious food, and looked at architecture, which would have bored you, and ridden on a camel, which you would have liked. And it was very hot. Now tell me what you have done since I went away. Any more bicycle accidents?”

“Only two,” said the Boy apologetically; “and they were quite little ones. One was when I met a hen and some

chickens, and it ran under my front wheel, and I had to fall off or I should have squashed the chickens as well; and the other was when I rode behind Theodore and kept on trying to bump him, like the boats at Oxford. I only bumped my elbow, and Theodore had to wear a bandage about twenty feet long. Putting it on was like winding a line on to a reel. I say, Raymond! we are all going to Swansfield for Christmas. Won't you come too?"

"I'm afraid not, Boy," replied Raymond. "It is my invariable rule to spend Christmas Day in bed, and I can't break it even for you."

"Most people spend the day after Christmas there," said the Boy. "But you're only ragging, I know. You will come, won't you?"

"No," said Raymond; "thank you kindly, but I won't. I should be a pretty spectre at your banquet. As

Christmas approaches, I feel as depressed as any corpulent goose or turkey."

The Boy contemplated him solemnly. "That's not the real reason, I know," he said.

"You're right," said Raymond; "there's no deceiving you. If I came to see you at Christmas I should be so unspeakably jovial, so brimful of practical jokes and parlour athletics, that Theodore's house would be left unto him desolate in no time. I should privately saw through the legs of the groaning board. On frosty mornings I should fill everybody's boots with water and put them on the window-sill to dry. I should stop up the chimneys, and fill the yule log with dynamite. I should put nitro-glycerine in the snapdragon. I should give every female child I saw a box of fusees and a fluffy muslin frock, and every male child should have a self-cocking revolver loaded with bullets of the most explosive

kind. So perhaps I had better not come to you for Christmas."

"What a rag it would be!" cried the Boy, who had listened with delight to this dreadful catalogue. "But that isn't really the reason, all the same. I know why you won't come."

"Indeed?" said Raymond.

"Yes, indeed," went on the Boy. "Raymond, you're afraid of Sibyl."

"Boy," said Raymond, "I admit it. Your sister fills me with profound fear. I think it probable that she would beat me severely if I ventured near her."

"We shall see," said the Boy darkly.

"I'm sorry,—I've no doubt that you would take pleasure in witnessing my castigation,—but you won't," replied Raymond. "And now, tell me, Boy, how is she?"

"She's pretty bad," said the Boy. He wriggled in a curious manner, which

in any one older than him might have betokened amusement.

"Oh, I'm sorry for that," said Raymond, without fervour.

"Jolly bad," repeated the Boy. Then he stretched himself slowly, like a sleepy cat, and remarked, "She seems to be worrying over something."

Raymond softly whistled a foolish tune, and looked out of the window. The daylight was beginning to fade.

"Is she in London?" he asked at length, in a tone of polite inquiry.

"Yes," replied the Boy. "Don't you remember that I said I was going to meet her this afternoon? I ought to be off now," he added, moving in his chair.

"No hurry," said Raymond.

The Boy wriggled again, and then sat still.

"What are you staring at me for?" asked Raymond after a while.

"I was thinking," the Boy answered.

"Very stupid thing to do," said Raymond. "Isn't this a half-holiday? What were you thinking?"

"I was wondering what Sibyl would give to be sitting in this chair," said the Boy meditatively.

"What?" said Raymond rudely.

The Boy repeated his remark.

"It certainly is a comfortable chair," said Raymond.

"I didn't mean that," explained the Boy.

"People of your age oughtn't to mean anything," said Raymond severely.

"I was thinking how she would like to be in this room."

"Then don't think such idiotic nonsense," said Raymond. The note of irritation in his voice, however, was somewhat forced.

"Fact. That's what she's worrying over," said the Boy.

"I don't know what you mean," said Raymond.

"I mean you."

"I am glad to see, my dear Cecil, that your imagination is as wonderful as ever," observed Raymond. He was actually blushing.

"Oh! I can see things," said the Boy. After a pause he remarked, "She's pretty miserable."

Raymond did not make any comment on this piece of news.

"She sits about alone all day," the Boy went on, "and when people come into the room she pretends to read books. She reads 'em upside down."

Silence from Raymond.

"I saw her once with your photograph. I know for certain that it was yours. And she was——"

"Boy!" cried Raymond suddenly, "I thought you were a decent, straight kind of fellow. You have been playing

the spy. If you say another word like that, I'll turn you out—I will really. Of all the monstrous nonsense——”

“Oh! all right,” said the Boy. “I beg your pardon. I'm just going.” There was no hint of impertinence in his voice.

Raymond was instantly filled with remorse. “No, no!” he cried. “Sit down, my dear fellow! What a cantankerous ass I am! I think hot climates have damaged my liver. Only it wasn't quite honourable, you know. Of course you meant it as a joke, though. Let us talk of something else.”

And they did, spasmodically. But the Boy monopolised the conversation, for Raymond had become suddenly thoughtful. The Boy, too, was hurt by the reprimand his diplomatic attempts had earned, and not long afterwards he said good-bye to Raymond, and departed, promising to return soon.

When he had gone, Raymond began to pace the room with knitted brows. Was it possible that there was a tiny chance of Theodore's prophecy being fulfilled? or was that demon of a boy trying to bring off an elaborate joke? Boys were brutes, of course, if they got wind of love-affairs. But Cecil was different from most boys—more tactful, more sympathetic—and also he was too fond of his sister to do anything wilfully that might cause her pain.

“I wish he hadn't gone,” said Raymond, “and I wish I hadn't shut him up so. And yet—I must see him again and try to discover if she really does care a little. . . . My photograph! she had one. . . . It might have been some one else's, though. I wish Theodore were here. I might go and see Mrs. Egerton, but that would offend Sibyl. Oh! I must see the Boy again!”

And at that moment the Boy came back, and thrust his head in at the door. Raymond started violently.

“Hullo! I made you jump,” said the Boy. “Sorry! I say, do you like the Zoo?”

“I love every part of it,” Raymond answered, “except the monkey-house. That always seems to me a personal insult, a thinly veiled caricature of humanity. But I’m all for lions and tigers and venomous serpents.”

“Will you come there with me?” asked the Boy. “I’ve got tickets for Sunday—to-morrow. It’s the best day. Do come!”

“I shall be delighted,” said Raymond. “Nobody will be with you, I suppose? I ask merely because I should hate to divide the charm of your company.”

“No one else,” replied the Boy. “I’ll call for you. No, I won’t—we’ll meet there.”

“Much better to drive up together,” said Raymond.

“No,” said the Boy, “I shan’t be near here.” He produced a slip of paper from his pocket. “There’s a ticket for you,” he said. “We’ll meet inside the gate any time you like.”

“No. Command me,” protested Raymond.

“All right: half-past two,—will that do for you?” asked the Boy. “Good-bye; don’t forget!” And he banged the door and fled.

Raymond inspected the slip of paper thoughtfully.

XIX

NEXT afternoon Raymond drove to Regent's Park as soon as he had finished lunch, and, as had been arranged, waited for the Boy near the gate of the Zoological Gardens.

He was in a state of excitement that seemed scarcely warranted by the circumstances. At the last moment, indeed, he had been minded to prove faithless, and had nearly sent a messenger to the Boy to announce that he could not keep his engagement. Fortunately, however, he thought better of this foolish and perfidious plan.

"I'm glad I came," he said, as he entered the Gardens. "And now that I am here, I see that there's no valid reason

why I should have any foolish scruples about discussing Sibyl cautiously, very cautiously, with the Boy. I was certainly far too Quixotic yesterday." Which observation testifies to what a depth mankind may fall from the lofty line of its ideals in a short twenty-four hours.

The apostate of honour sat down on a seat and waited impatiently. Time fled, but the Boy did not appear, and at last he rose and began to walk about and to look anxiously at the people who were entering the gate. There were several small boys in large collars, but the flamboyant yellow head glowed not amongst them.

"I might have realised," said Raymond, "that the Boy's Sunday lunch would be a matter of hours."

He was beginning to look slightly bored, and contemplated the other visitors with an unfriendly eye. But suddenly an expression of amazement stole over

his face; he stared wildly into the crowd.

“It can’t be!” he said. “I’m mad. I’m asleep. I don’t believe it!” He drew back into the shelter of a large shrub. “Good heavens!” he murmured.

A lady had entered. She was unattended, apparently. She walked like a goddess, and appeared to be looking for some one.

“It is she!” cried Raymond to his heart, as this lady came near him. “It is she! At last my famished eyes are fed. But apart from the æsthetic beauty of the spectacle, this is extremely awkward. I didn’t want to see her until I had talked to the Boy; I think I had better go away. Nothing will induce me to go away, however. I must speak to her. Oh! that brute of a Boy! He’s a traitor. She wouldn’t have come if she had known I was to be his other companion. He never told her; he

wanted to see our discomfiture at meeting. I wonder, though, where he is; I don't see his dishonourable head anywhere near her. I might be able to speak to her before he turns up. Raymond, you tremble like a child before the pickled rod. I'm ashamed of you. Your ridiculous heart is throbbing like a steam-engine. She didn't come here to see *you*, you ass. But at any rate I won't sit here as if I were a zoological specimen. I must speak to her."

He renounced the shade of the shrub and walked towards the lady, who was still watching the entrance.

"How d'you do?" he said foolishly.

The lady turned quickly, and at the sight of him actually uttered a little cry. She recovered her self-possession immediately, however, and held out her hand calmly. But the expression of her eyes when they first met his had set his foolish heart a-throbbing still more outrageously.

"I—I had no idea that you were here," she said, rather faintly.

Raymond essayed a ghastly joke to the effect that he was not a permanent exhibit.

"I meant in London," she said. The flush had left her face now; she was very white. She looked thinner, too, he noticed.

"You are tired," he said. "Come and sit down here." He pointed to the seat near the shrub.

"I'm not," she answered, with a smile; but she sat down on the seat.—"Have you seen Cecil?" she asked.

Raymond became bright scarlet immediately. "No," he said. "Do you want to see him?"

"He promised to meet me here," said Sibyl.

"Oh! he won't be long, then!" said Raymond airily. But deep down in his heart he thirsted for the Boy's blood,

and yet longed to load him with rich rewards.

“He is very tiresome,” she said.

“But an admirable person,” rejoined Raymond. “You are more adorable than ever,” he said inwardly; “pallor only adds to your divinity, and the pathetic curve of your lips is the last triumphant production of Nature. If she never produced another woman it would be quite excusable. I should understand; I should sympathise. Heaven send that the perfidious Boy, the excellent, iniquitous, most abominable and splendid Boy, be fast asleep on a soft couch!” Aloud, he observed that the weather was fine.

She agreed with him. An impressive silence ensued.

“You won’t trouble to wait, I hope,” she said after a while. “Cecil is sure to come very soon.”

“Oh! I’m waiting for some one too,” answered Raymond. “And I want to

talk to you. Don't send me away: this is such a lonely place, and the lions and tigers growl at me savagely." He uttered this brilliant remark in the most cheerily conventional tone that his sensations permitted him to adopt.

Sibyl looked slightly surprised.

"Oh, of course," she said. "You have been abroad for some time, haven't you?"

"For an age," Raymond answered. "I have been lounging in the sunshine. And thinking, thinking of nothing but you and your voice and your unfathomable eyes." But she did not hear the end of his sentence.

"I hope you had a pleasant time," she said.

"It was delightful, thank you," he replied. "And you? Have you been at Swansfield?"

"Yes," she said. It was a good sign, thought the foolish Raymond, that she so persistently averted her eyes.

"But we have been in London for nearly a month," she added.

"Pour forth platitudes; talk as if you were at a suburban tea-party," said Raymond to himself, "or you'll ruin everything. "I saw the Boy yesterday," he said to Sibyl. "He has grown past belief."

"Hasn't he?" she assented. "He told me that he had met you."

"Ah!" said Raymond.

Conversation died of a monosyllable. They looked towards the entrance, Raymond apprehensively, Sibyl . . . ah! who can select the appropriate adverb? Probably it was not the one implied by her next remark,

"I wish Cecil wouldn't always be late," she said.

"My friend is scarcely qualified for the ranks of the punctual," said Raymond. "We seem to have been unfortunate in our choice of companions."

"Most unfortunate," agreed Sibyl.

The stream of visitors diminished. Somewhere in the distance a clock chimed. She looked at her watch.

"He is three-quarters of an hour late," she observed.

"So is my friend," said Raymond. "But I owe them both a debt of gratitude." He looked steadily in front of him as he made this remark. Sibyl again contemplated the very interesting path. Raymond also began to inspect it.

"Are you sure that your friend didn't arrive here before you?" asked Sibyl presently. "He might be in one of the houses?"

"How do you know that my friend is of the male sex?" he said, smiling. She smiled too; their eyes met.

"Women are always exactly half an hour late," she answered.

"You yourself disprove that cynical sentiment," said Raymond. "But you

are right. My friend is of the feeblor sex. He is a boy."

"A boy!" she cried. "How kind of you to wait for him! But I don't think he can be a very nice boy."

"I always thought him delightful, and now I think him perfect," said Raymond. Then he stole a glance at her face, and endured a spasm of bewilderment. For she was actually looking acutely miserable.

Did she then care, after all? And was she hurt by his absurd attempt to talk as if they were mere acquaintances? Now, or never, was the time for acting swiftly and skilfully. He turned towards her.

"That was a stupid thing to say," he remarked.

She did not speak, and he judged it safer to contemplate the path, for the sight of her face unnerved him.

"A very stupid thing," he added

meditatively. From the corner of his traitorous eye he observed that her lips quivered, but she was still silent.

“I beg your pardon,” he said suddenly.

No answer.

“I suppose that I had better go away,” he observed to the path—without moving, however. And he noted that his supposition did not produce any sign of pleasure in her face.

There was a short silence, and then Raymond burnt his ships.

“Miss Dalrymple,” he said sternly.

“Yes,” said Sibyl, very softly, and to the path.

“Hadn’t you resolved never to see me again?”

A scarcely perceptible nod answered his question.

“I knew you had,” said Raymond. “Now do you think that was quite fair? Did you imagine I was hypocrite enough to try to explain away the unforgivable,

to defend what couldn't be excused? I know that I'm a fool, but I haven't descended to such dreary folly as all that."

He waited for a little while. He was playing for the sublime stake now, and knew the rhetorical value of an interval of silence. Then he went on, magnificently.

"To let me infer my dismissal—I mean, my punishment—to deny me even the last consolation of hearing your lips condemn me: don't you think that was an over-delicate refinement of cruelty? It made me imagine, you know, that you looked upon my offence with the same loathing that I felt for it. And that's absurdly impossible. You couldn't do it. It isn't in you. Thank Heaven!" In spite of his resolve to be calm, he became incoherent, and ceased abruptly.

And then at last the bewildered lady spoke.

"I can't understand—I never could," she said bitterly. "Why do you speak of it? Why did you come back into my life? I had forgotten all about it."

"I don't believe you," said Raymond calmly.

She looked enormously astonished.

"Well," she said more quietly, after staring at him, "I thought that I was beginning to forget. And then—when the Boy told me that he had seen you, I knew it was no use: I knew that I should have to fight the same—thoughts—over and over again, and that all my life I should remember the dreadful words that horrible man said to me, thinking they were amusing. Oh! I grow cold when I hear men laughing together, and imagine that they must know the whole wretched story—my story. What must other men's minds be like, when you could think—that—of me?"

She looked very distressed. Raymond curbed his emotions with a vast effort.

“Now listen,” he said. “I’m not going to defend myself: I am far viler, as I told you, than your white thoughts could imagine; but it’s absurd for you to make yourself miserable about that episode. Don’t be afraid: I’m not going to resuscitate it in detail. From my point of view, of course, it was bitter tragedy; but I can’t see how you and the rest of the world are able to regard it as anything but essentially comic. At all events, it’s over now: Dunton has forgotten all about it, your brother knows only the faint outline, and I am going out of your life for ever, by request. In a few months you will have a difficulty in believing that anything unpleasant happened, and in a year the remembrance (if it exists at all) will move you to inextinguishable laughter. As to my thinking it of you, as you phrase it—I

never thought anything of you except that you were . . . But that is beside the point. At least you will let me remember that we parted friends." He held out his hand. "And if that," said he inwardly, "is not the finest piece of sophistical reasoning since the Porch became the home of bats and owls, may I be given a logical mind as a punishment."

She did not appear to observe his outstretched hand, so he withdrew it. "That is settled, then," he said cheerily. "And now we will talk of less gloomy matters. Our traitorous friends come not, apparently. Don't you think it is rather extraordinary that we should both have appointments for the same time, at the same place, and with the same kind of creature?"

Sibyl looked bewildered, and even annoyed, at his sudden change of tone. She murmured assent, however.

"It is also odd," said Raymond, with

an air of elaborate unconcern, "that my perfidious friend should be at the school which is honoured by your brother's patronage. I think I forgot to tell you that."

"At Westminster?" she cried. "How strange!"

"At Westminster," he responded gravely.

"I wonder if they are friends," she said.

"It is more than possible," said Raymond: "their tastes are identical."

"Perhaps I know your boy," she went on: "Cecil sometimes brings his friends to lunch on Sunday. What is his name?"

"Ah! his name——"

She smiled. "You don't mean to say that you have forgotten it?" she said.

"Here's another coincidence!" cried Raymond. "My friend has the same name as the Boy."

“He is called Cecil?”

“Yes. Most remarkable thing.” He looked at her; and then a sudden suspicion found its way to her heart.

“What do you mean?” she cried.

“He is called Cecil, and he has yellow hair and blue eyes almost as deep as yours and he has a sister and his other name is Dalrymple,” said Raymond, all in a breath. And then he waited.

She looked at him for a moment with amazed eyes. Then she rose. “Good afternoon, Mr. Curzon,” she said icily.

“No! upon my honour,” said Raymond, rising too, “I knew nothing. It was the Boy who planned it. I had no idea that he was such a student of human nature. I am as innocent of this as you are.” He paused suddenly. “You are innocent of it, aren’t you?” he asked. His mouth tightened to a humorous line; there was a gleam of amusement in his eyes.

“ Oh ! ” she cried, staggered by this monstrous impertinence. A flush crept over her face, her lips trembled, and then,—there was no help for it,—they both began to laugh.

“ The Boy’s practical jokes are the bane of all my days,” she said. “ But I wonder why he thought of this. He really has great inventive genius ! ”

“ Oh ! it’s a very obvious joke,” said Raymond.

“ Obvious ! ” she cried.

“ Yes,” he said. “ I see what prompted him well enough.”

“ What was it ? ”

“ He thought that . . . But nothing will induce me to tell you.”

“ Why not ? ”

“ You would be mortally offended.”

“ No. You must tell me.”

“ Never ! ”

“ Then I shall never forgive him.”

“ Oh ! if it’s a question of purchasing

his forgiveness," said Raymond, "I don't mind. I'll sacrifice myself."

"That is the question," said Sibyl.

"Well, then—if you must know—though you'll be horribly annoyed, he had the audacity to think that we still cared a little."

"Cared for what?" asked Sibyl innocently.

"For each other, you know," explained Raymond.

"Oh!" said Sibyl.

"Very absurd of him," said Raymond.

"Extremely ridiculous," said Sibyl.

And then they looked in each other's eyes.

* * * * *

"Won't you forgive him?" asked Raymond. "I will."

She did not answer.

"I believe you have forgiven him already," he whispered. "I forgave him as soon as I saw you."

She looked up shyly. "Perhaps I forgave him then too," she said.

"I suspected it from the first moment," said Raymond.

"I knew you weren't really hopeless," she retorted.

"We are a pretty pair of actors," he remarked.

"Your disguise didn't deceive me," said Sibyl.

"Your mask was transparent, too," said Raymond; "but, at any rate, the play has a happy ending."

"The best possible," answered Sibyl; "and we won't wait for the Boy any longer."

"No. This is an absurdly public place," said Raymond, "and the animals do stare so."

THE END.

